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Day of the Woman?: Feminism & Rape-Revenge Films

Kayley A. Viteo

The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor

Dr. Alison Hearn

The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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DAY OF THE WOMAN?: FEMINISM & RAPE-REVENGE FILMS

(Spine Title: Day of the Woman?)

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by

Kayley Ann Viteo

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

Supervisor

Examiners

Dr. Alison Hearn

Dr. Tim Blackmore

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Carole Farber

Dr. Susan Knabe

Dr. Kimberly J. Verwaayen

The thesis by

Kayley Ann Viteo

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Abstract

This thesis examines the horror film sub-genre of ‘rape revenge’ for the ways it reflects and helps to constitute broader public debates about women and feminism. In order to do so, it examines two well-known representatives of the sub-genre, *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*. Both of these films were initially made in 1972 and 1978 respectively and were recently remade in 2009 and 2010. This thesis examines both the originals and the remakes of these films within and against their socio-historical context, with a specific focus on dominant discussions about feminism and women taking place at the time. The thesis also examines the films in terms of their narrative structure and general aesthetic elements. The combination of textual, historical and comparative analysis allows this thesis to examine the way the films express cultural fears and anxieties about women and traditional gender relations. The thesis concludes that the rape-revenge sub genre acts to condition the ways in which common perceptions of femininity, feminism, and sexual assault are portrayed, and indeed reproduced, in the social world at large.

Keywords

Feminism, Genre, Horror films, History, Textual analysis, United States

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Feminist” horror films are compellingly complex cultural objects. This complexity is due to the two categories that are linked together in the name: feminism and the horror genre. The horror genre is often thought of as misogynistic, superficial and without any cultural relevance; indeed, the genre is seen to propagate a patriarchal perspective that offers no pleasure for, or excludes, female spectators. Of course, the category of feminism is not without its own complexities and problems. Debates about what feminism *is*, or who feminists *are* and what they believe, have raged throughout the first, second, and third ‘waves’ of feminist social movements. These two internally complex categories, as they are brought together in the genre of feminist horror film, produce passionate debate, not only among feminist horror fans, but also within the general North American population of film viewers.

Given this, it becomes crucial to analyze popular culture texts, especially those whose feminist sensibilities, or lack thereof, are openly contested, for the ways in which they contribute to more general cultural discourses and understandings of what feminism is, and what it is not. As Jacinda Read, author of *The New Avengers*, argues, “we cannot afford to ignore the fact that we are living in a culture in which ideas about feminism and its history are as, if not more, likely to be gleaned from popular culture than from reading feminist theory.”¹ Horror films that have been named “feminist” not only reflect feminist concerns, but also effectively frame dominant views of feminism and what it means to

¹ Jacinda Read, *The new avengers: Feminism, femininity and the rape-revenge cycle* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 7.

identify as a feminist. In this thesis, I examine rape-revenge films specific to the horror genre in order to facilitate an analysis of the ways in which cinematic horror works to constitute popular ideas about feminism.

The history of the horror film is rich and complex. From the gothic tradition of the early twentieth century, including *Frankenstein* (1910), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), to the proliferation of remakes of classic horror films in the first decade of the twenty-first century, horror has been an important part of the North American cultural sphere. Two decades in particular are significant to this thesis: 1970-1980 and 2000-2010. The former is largely considered the golden age of horror, whereas contemporary horror (particularly at the turn of the millennium) is considered to be a horror cinema in crisis.² The 1970s are often referred to as the golden age of horror in large part because of the success of the slasher film. Best described as “stalker movies,” these films typically focus on a group of teenagers, including at least one female protagonist, who are being systemically hunted and murdered by a psychotic killer. The 1970s saw the release of numerous slasher films, the most notable of which include: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Black Christmas* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *The Toolbox Murders* (1978), and *Friday the 13th* (1980). Many of these films spawned sequels, and in the 1980s and 1990s the horror genre was defined by the development of various franchises. In contrast to the proliferation of original, though admittedly formulaic, narratives of the 1970s, the success of the horror genre in the early twenty-first

² See *Projected Fears* by Kendall Phillips, *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium* by Steffan Hantke, and *The American Horror Film* by Reynold Humphries.

century has been largely dependent on a return to golden age originals – all of the above films have since been remade.³

The history of theoretical work on the horror film is also dynamic. The majority of academic horror criticism has been rooted in a psychoanalytical perspective, chiefly working with studies of repression and the unconscious,⁴ although there has been work from a cognitive psychology perspective as well.⁵ While some academics choose to focus on the text, others focus solely on the spectator, and still others have a combined focus.⁶ At both a spectatorial and scholarly level, then, these films allow for intriguing and complex kinds of analysis. In short, neither the horror film itself nor the study of it can be simply defined or categorized.

The horror genre has the potential to act as a site of resistance to the status quo, but can also function as a place where it is reestablished. Whether dealing with supernatural possession, a great white shark, a serial killer whose strength defies reality, or rape-revenge, the horror genre has always dealt exclusively in anxiety as a response to its socio-historical background. It is “predominantly concerned with death and *the impacts and effects of the past*.”⁷ Unwittingly or not, horror films react to and reproduce cultural anxiety⁸ by creating narratives that are purposefully frightening or disturbing, or both. In many ways, then, the “history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety

³ *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Black Christmas* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), *The Toolbox Murders* (2004), *Friday the 13th* (2009).

⁴ See Robin Wood.

⁵ See Noel Carroll.

⁶ See Carol Clover.

⁷ Read, *The new avengers*, 7, emphasis added.

⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, cultural anxiety refers to the uncertainty of roles and identities when traditional American social mores are in constant flux.

of the twentieth century”.⁹ By the 1970s, arguably, that anxiety was increasingly focused on second-wave issues related to gender and found its expression through specific narrative forms, including the slasher film and the rape-revenge film.

The horror genre, however, has no clearly defined boundaries, and the discussion of “what is horror?” is varied and complex. The genre is ambiguously defined, its fluidity leading to an overall subjective interpretation as to what constitutes a horror film. The clearest reason for defining a film as horror is its depiction of a monster, which can take many different forms, but acts as a representation of “particular fears ... [or] a direct and unfettered expression of *the horrors that surround us*.”¹⁰ Thus, the horrific “monster,” and ensuing narrative, has significance when read in relation to their contemporary contexts. While horror elements are used in other genres (particularly science-fiction and fantasy), these films were not necessarily understood as horror films.¹¹ Still, the usage of the horror genre’s traditions and tropes in films not easily labeled as horror complicated – and continues to complicate – analytical readings of these texts because of their cross-genre nature, particularly in studies of audience and reception.

With the popularity of slasher films in the 1970s, horror started to emerge as a recognizable genre in its own right. In particular, horror emerged as the genre that graphically detailed real-life horrors on film; no longer rooted in fantasy, the so-called golden age of 1970s horror embraced the *human* monster. This emerging generic definition, because of its relation to slasher films, was thus intrinsically gendered. Slasher films, with their masculinized killer and feminized victims, literalized sexual violence,

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower Press, 2000), 9, emphasis added.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

often through extended sequences of penetrating violence. For many critics the kind of violence in slasher films “support[s] readings of the films as sadistic rape-oriented narratives.”¹² Similarly, rape-revenge films, which also came into their own during the 1970s, are often considered horror because of the way in which they utilize rape as an animating principle, echoing the slasher genre’s usage of sexual elements to advance or otherwise enhance narratives. Both slasher and rape-revenge films also are symptomatic of a broader cultural turn during the 1970s wherein narratives of revenge granted the female victim a much higher degree of agency. Slasher films popularized the notion of the “final girl,” in which the primary female protagonist survives and vanquishes the killer. Rape-revenge utilizes a similar structure¹³ in that the female who is traumatized in the first half of the film avenges that trauma in the second half.

The confluence of female sexual liberation and the so-called crisis in masculinity in the mid- to late 1970s led to the production of many films of different genres that portrayed clashes between the two genders.¹⁴ At the same time, feminist film critics, drew attention to films’ stereotypically sexualized portrayals of women and focus on rape and harassment, and began to protest “an acceleration of violence against women in film and an increasing eroticization of violence in media more broadly.”¹⁵ In contrast, other theorists (including other feminist film critics) argued that genre film, including horror, allowed for visibility of taboo subjects where mainstream cinema did not. As Carol

¹² Ibid., 79.

¹³ With exception to those revenge narratives where another person takes revenge on the victim’s behalf.

¹⁴ Examples include *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *The Way We Were* (1973), *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974), *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), *Norma Rae* (1979) and *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979).

¹⁵ Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 219.

Clover argues of the slasher film, “exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, (it) gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes ... than do the legitimate products of the better studios.”¹⁶

One result of this clash between genders, politics, and the cultural sphere was the mainstreaming of rape-revenge narratives, which occurred in the early 1970s.¹⁷ Because of the way in which both slasher films and rape-revenge utilized rape or the threat of sexual assault as a central narrative principle, both types of films raised concerns about violence against women and drew the response of feminist film critics. This was due to the increasing public presence of the anti-rape movement, as well as broader second-wave feminist discourse regarding sexual politics, particularly the ways in which men and women interact with each other, and how power shapes these relationships. The figure of the independent, single female was taken up within the horror genre to create even more extreme gender narrative within film: rape-revenge. Clover argues that “[r]epresentations of sexual violence at their core offer a rich source of investigation for feminism” because of the way in which rape narratives are tied to issues of gender identity.¹⁸ As Clover further notes, in the 1970s genre film “femaleness allowed the ‘body’ story to be told with far greater relish, and [the female protagonist’s] feminist rage pumped new energy into the ‘social’ story.”¹⁹

It is important to note that the rape-revenge film is not solely the property of the horror genre, nor is it limited by its “low” culture status, location, or time period. Rape-

¹⁶ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁷ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 8.

¹⁸ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

revenge films are extremely geographically widespread, in part because they follow an easily identified narrative framework. In the first half of the narrative, a woman is raped. In the second half, the woman (or in some cases a family member) enacts revenge on her rapists by torturing and killing them. Often, there is a comparatively short period of time in between these two sections wherein the protagonist heals and prepares to challenge her attackers. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vols. 1 and 2* are considered distorted rape-revenge pictures and were hugely popular²⁰, although perhaps the most famous and recognizable example of a mainstream rape-revenge film is Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise*. Other prominent rape-revenge films include *The Virgin Spring* [Ingmar Bergman, 1960], *Lipstick* [Lamont Johnson, 1976], *Baise-Moi* [Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000], and *Irréversible* [Gaspar Noé, 2002]. The rape-revenge genre is often referred to as a 'video nasty' because of its challenging subject matter.²¹

Rape-revenge as a sub-genre of horror deserves theoretical contemplation and academic response for a variety of reasons, most importantly because of its broad appeal and because of the socio-political contexts within which these films were made and released.²² The rape-revenge films I will discuss in detail are *Last House on the Left* (originally made in 1972 and remade in 2009) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (originally made in 1978 and remade in 2010). I will situate the two iterations of both of these films against their specific socio-historical backdrops, specifically the feminist writings and

²⁰ It has also been argued that Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof*, wherein girls are chased by a mad stuntman with a killer car, is a rape-revenge film if one understands sexual violence to be embodied by a sexualized car. A second set of women avenges the murdered first group, sexualizing their own vehicle in the process.

²¹ Video nasty, a term originally from the United Kingdom, refers to low-budget horror films that test censorship laws for their explicit portrayal of sex and/or violence.

²² Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, 6.

politics that were dominant at the time. This will allow me to compare the films against one another, not only textually, but contextually as well. I focus on both originals and remakes for a specific purpose: to offer a contextually-informed reading of the films' narratives in order to make claims about how the films work to reflect and constitute ideas about femininity and feminism. Studying horror rape-revenge films, then, will help to illuminate the position of women and feminism in the time periods during which these films were made, and the role these films may have played in challenging or advancing ideas about feminism and female empowerment. With that in mind, even though some consider rape-revenge to be "'body-in-pieces' horror" with "little social merit"²³, these films can be seen to represent and, arguably, exacerbate significant cultural changes and fears related to gender and female empowerment (as will be seen in Chapters 3 and 4).

The two films I have chosen to analyze – *Last House on the Left* (1972/2009) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978/2010) - have been lightning rods for debates about their possible feminist or anti-feminist subtext. These films were chosen because of their initial popularity in the 1970s and because they have experienced resurgence in popularity; both were remade within the last three years. In the case of these films, the remakes are virtually identical in terms of basic plot and adherence to the rape-revenge structure; the differences, however, involve script changes, updates to accommodate the new time period, and changes in the violence depicted. Tracking instances of violence, such as the way in which the presentation of the respective rape and revenge sequences have changed, for example, help to locate the films within a specific historical and cultural context. The greatest difference between both the originals and remakes of these films

²³ Wells, *The Horror Genre*, 87.

involves who enacts the revenge. In *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978/2010), it is the victim who transforms from victim to avenger. In *Last House on the Left* (1972/2009), it is the victim's family that enacts revenge on her behalf. This thesis, then, discusses both types of rape-revenge: female and family revenge. While this is not the only point of comparison between *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*, it marks them as different types of rape-revenge films.

Both films, originals and remakes, must address the issue of whether the rape or the revenge should be given more time and narrative focus, and assessing this balance can provide clues as to the nature of the films' cultural significance. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas in her discussion of *I Spit On Your Grave* asks: "which is more upsetting to watch, the rape or the revenge? And who has the right to answer this? On whose behalf do they speak?"²⁴ The rape must be shown in enough detail to counter-balance the revenge; likewise, revenge must be shown to be proportional to the violent rape, otherwise the film "risks letting the rapists off to some degree."²⁵ In truth, a delicate balance must be struck between the two in order to facilitate the transformation from victim to avenger that is at the center of the narrative and to effectively ally the audience with the female character. This thesis will examine and assess how this transformation is represented and what meanings in relation to female empowerment it is able to evoke and mobilize in relation to broader concerns about the representation of women in popular culture.

²⁴ Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, 36.

²⁵ Ibid.

Molly Haskell, author of *From Reverence to Rape*, terms the seventies as the “age of ambivalence” argues that issues around what kind of cinematic representation women desired were fraught::

Even if Hollywood hadn’t ignored us [women], we would have been hard-put to find a consensus as to just what we wanted to see on the screen: did we want women to be shown, dismally and realistically, as victims; or progressively, as vanquishers of mighty odds?²⁶

Rape-revenge films in which women take revenge on their rapists do not show one or the other; rather, they show the female as both the victim and vanquisher of evil. In these films, a transformation occurs between the first and final act, one which may be understood as marking a change from a feminine to feminist perspective. In this schema, the feminine is always the victim and the feminist always the avenger. However, what is considered ‘feminist’ action in the final act is often difficult to determine, as the revenge often includes a reversal of the sexual assault. That is, the female uses her sexuality in order to systematically trap her victimizers and enact her revenge and so remains an ambivalent figure in relation to feminist discourse.

A focus on the remakes of these films will facilitate a consideration of how and in what ways narrative strategies around female transformation and empowerment have changed from the time of the original films, and will shed light on how social views about women’s power and feminism in general have shifted over time. The thesis will ask: how has the discourse of female vulnerability changed, if at all? What does the content of each film say about the context in which it was produced? How have understandings of feminism, and indeed rape, changed over time within popular culture?

²⁶ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 392.

A textual analysis of both the remake and original film must be situated against each other in order to evaluate similarities and differences. Crucial to this analysis, then, is the recognition that these films are important “not *despite* but *because of* their complexities and contradictions.”²⁷

If a film is remade, it is crucial to examine what has changed and to ask whether these changes reflect or comment on larger social shifts. This analysis will also attempt to assess whether the parameters of the rape-revenge horror subgenre have changed and what this might mean for feminism and femininity. Carol Clover asserts that, “the independent, low-budget tradition has been central in the manufacture of the new ‘tough girls’ that have loomed so large in horror since the mid-seventies.”²⁸ With this in mind, I will also consider whether the originals are rendered more legitimate or meaningful in light of their remakes.²⁹ For example, is *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) a more politically sympathetic text given the content of its remake?

Theoretical, Methodological Framework, & Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

While there are a number of different theoretical approaches to understanding horror film, in this thesis, I draw on a cultural studies approach to understanding how meaning is created, produced, deployed and exchanged within specific cultural texts. Stuart Hall, in *Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, asserts that in its simplest form, culture is a set of shared meanings. These meanings “organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical

²⁷ Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, 187

²⁸ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 143.

²⁹ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 137.

effects.”³⁰ Meaning is not static; rather, it is produced through endless “dialogue,” created, shared and received in relationships.³¹ Hall’s understanding of culture and cultural texts complicates the reflective approach to cultural products, like film, in which “meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world.”³² Reality is not mirrored unproblematically and transparently inside the narrative framework of film; instead, film narratives heighten, distort and play on real world experiences, and broader cultural discourses including those dealing with gender, the family, and feminism, which are, themselves, historically and culturally contingent. Because a text’s meaning is understood as being produced relationally, as a kind of cultural negotiation, meanings change across audiences and identities and also across time. Key to the idea of negotiation is Gramsci’s concept of hegemony,³³ which “describes the ever shifting, ever negotiating play of ideological, social and political forces through which power is maintained and contested.”³⁴ Ideologies are not static or ahistorical, but “are subject to continuous (re)negotiation.”³⁵ Films are symptomatic of their *particular* historical moment and are informed by the ideologies which are circulating in this moment, but how these texts are received are lived out varies. As I indicated above, the horror genre in particular “remains highly correspondent to the

³⁰ Stuart Hall, ed., *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ Sue Thornham, ed., *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 162.

³⁴ Christine Gledhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations,” in Thornham, *Ibid.* 169-70.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

social and cultural upheavals to which it runs parallel”³⁶ and becomes a site where anxieties associated with these upheavals can be obliquely expressed.

While Christine Gledhill, in “Pleasurable Negotiations,” draws on Hall to argue for the importance of analyzing meaning “at three different levels: institutions, texts, and audiences,”³⁷ my work will concentrate primarily on the level of texts. I will draw connections between these texts and their broader social and cultural contexts, specifically discourses and ideologies about feminism and femininity. The readings of the films produced here also work to highlight the “social negotiation of meanings, definitions and identities” contained within them.³⁸ Inspired by Foucault’s discontinuous view of history, one in which “the radical breaks, ruptures and discontinuities between one period and another”³⁹ present significant points of entry for analysis, I will look at the continuities and differences between these two sets of horror films. This thesis is primarily concerned with reading the narratives and visual elements of these films for their dominant meanings and with the ways these meanings represent, negotiate, and, indeed, generate larger cultural meanings about women, power, and feminism. As Hall writes, meaning “is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups.”⁴⁰ In short, my approach to studying the meaning of these films is largely focused on issues of gender difference and gender relations as they are cinematically represented and as they are in dialogue with

³⁶ Wells, *The Horror Genre*, 25.

³⁷ Thornham, *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, 162.

³⁸ Gledhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations,” 175.

³⁹ Hall, *Cultural Representations*, 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

their *specific historical context*, including the dominant political, economic and social concerns of the time.

Though my approach here is primarily informed by Hall, it also engages with feminist psychoanalytic film theory in taking up the insights of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," written in 1975. In addition to identifying the scopophilic pleasure of the male spectator, whereby women are objectified through the male gaze, Mulvey argues that the "pleasure in looking" responds to, derives from, and intersects with dominant ideologies.⁴¹ Her psychoanalytically informed analysis of the specific ways in which women were represented in mainstream film in the 1950s and 60s enshrines a view of woman as, both, spectacle (her "to-be-looked-at-ness") and as epitomizing lack or castration anxiety.⁴² In doing so, these narratives produce a "split between active/male and passive/female."⁴³ In the specific films on which Mulvey bases her analysis, the active/male and passive/female split, drives storymaking – the controlling figure is always male, and the narrative is entirely oriented around male purposes and goals.⁴⁴ Coupled with the active power of the erotic look, the male figure is given "a satisfying sense of omnipotence"⁴⁵ In contrast, in these films, women are subjugated by their inherent lack of a penis and, thus, power. However, a "phallogentric paradox"⁴⁶ is produced because narratives are dependent on women not only for display/desire, but also in order to advance the story. In the case of rape-revenge, the rape of women is necessary to the storyline – in order to get to any form of revenge (familial

⁴¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Thornham.

⁴² Karen Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 11.

⁴³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

or female), some form of sexual violence must occur. Women bodies, particularly in rape-revenge, are sites for invasion, penetration, and are often presented in a voyeuristic manner. At the same time, however, the woman who actively seeks revenge appears to move beyond the simplistic binary of active/male and passive/female. Because of its representations of both types of female (passive and active; castrated and phallic), rape-revenge is a genre that represents a unique opportunity for analysis

Methodology

Popular representations, such as films, comprise our cultural landscape; they are public, social and *shared*. Discerning the range of meanings in a cultural production is thus a complex process. As Cynthia Freeland asserts in *The Naked and the Undead*, “[f]eminist film readings interpret how films function as artifacts, and to do this, they must explore such diverse aspects of a film as its plot, editing, sound track, point of view, dialogue, character representations, use of rhetoric, and narrative structures.”⁴⁷ In keeping with this feminist approach, I will be documenting the majority of these elements in *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*. My analysis will focus on plot, point of view, dialogue and characters. I will consider the entirety of the film, but will focus on particularly important or salient scenes. Close readings of parallel scenes in the original and remake will then allow me to consider the specific continuities and differences between each film. A secondary level of analysis will attend to editing and narrative structure.

Chapters 3 and 4 will employ textual analysis coupled with situating each film in relation to their historical backdrop, focusing on specific political events and historically

⁴⁷ Cynthia A. Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and The Appeal of Horror* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 211.

contingent social concerns that, I argue, can be seen to have influenced the films. This contextual analysis will be bolstered by a focus on the film's narrative and its visual style, particularly in relation to the lead female character(s). I will describe how the central female character acts pre- and post-victimization, as well as how her revenge actually takes place. This can and will include anything from dialogue to how shots are framed, with particular attention paid to how violent scenes are edited. In addition to an analysis of the plot and characterization, the primarily qualitative analysis undertaken here also will examine how the time and location within which the films take place are given weight inside the larger narrative, and will assess editing, cinematography, and framing.

⁴⁸ Key questions include:

- How is the female character positioned pre- and post-victimization through her manner and dress? Is she positioned as “deserving” of rape? Is she positioned as self-sufficient in taking her revenge? Is her revenge sexualized?
- From whose perspective is the audience viewing violent acts? And, is there a switch in point of view as the victim transforms?
- During rape sequences, where is the focus? Is the camera positioned so the audience sees both the violent act and the bystanders, or is the focus on the female's trauma? Similarly, during revenge sequences, where is the focus? Is the camera positioned so that viewers again concentrate on the female – this time in triumph – or is the focus on the male's pain?
- For *Last House on the Left*, what revenge roles do the mother and father take on? Is the mother's revenge sexualized?

In chapters 3 and 4, the originals of both films will be discussed against their historical backdrop, especially the broader conditions of the feminist movement. Given that both films are American, the focus of my historical context will be the United States. The thesis will describe what strands of feminism were popular and culturally dominant at the time and will assess their core ideas. It will attempt to determine how and in what

⁴⁸ Ibid.

ways these forms of feminism are addressed or managed in each film, and will attempt to point out what broader cultural events might have inspired each film.⁴⁹ Both original films reflect the chaotic mix of changing gender relations, the women's liberation movement, increasing anti-Vietnam War sentiment, and the spread of the counterculture in the 1960s and early 1970s. The remakes of these films were made against the backdrop of postfeminism and third-wave feminism, and in a post-911 America marked by a return to conservative values and a "general sense of hysteria, fear, and paranoia."⁵⁰ Chapter 2 will provide a general outline of the central historical events that occurred in and around the films' release, with a specific focus on developments within feminism.

Literature Review

In addition to the work of Hall and Mulvey, my reading and analysis of these films is guided by the work of several theorists whose work specifically addresses horror film and feminism, as well as work on representations of rape in popular media. A thesis on feminism and horror would not be complete without a consideration of the work of Carol Clover and Barbara Creed. Clover, author of *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, is best known for her creation of the term "final girl," which refers to the surviving female in slasher films. Her highly influential 1992 book documenting gender in slasher and rape-revenge films works to refute claims that rape-revenge is simply an exploitative genre with no cultural merit, arguing instead that "female self-sufficiency, both physical and

⁴⁹ It also must be noted that both films (in either time period) deal exclusively with white women and men. Therefore, other strands of feminism, such as black feminism, which argues that issues of race and class are inseparable from issues of sexism, or lesbian radical feminist issues are not discussed here. Additionally, the issue of class is dealt with in relation to the film, but only as it intersects with gender.

⁵⁰ Kendall Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 196.

mental, is the hallmark of the rape-revenge genre.”⁵¹ However, Clover notes in her exploration of both types of films that this self-sufficiency is a “‘masculinization’ of the rape victim.”⁵² Clover further notes this is represented through masculine dress and behavior,⁵³ which is due to “heroism wanting male representatives.”⁵⁴ Clover here draws on Mulvey’s own distinctions between the active/male and passive/female, arguing that this type of characterization echoes a feminine strength literally disguised in male clothing. This disguise is necessary because in slasher films, and by extension rape-revenge, “the losing combination is the figuratively castrated feminine male”; concomitantly, the winning combination is the masculinized female. Clover’s complication of Mulvey’s conception of activity and passivity are key to this project, and more generally Clover’s textual approach informs my own analytic approach in dealing with these four rape-revenge films.

In contrast to Clover’s masculinized female, Creed fully embraces the powerful female figure/monster, or what she terms the monstrous feminine in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993). She utilizes both feminist and psychoanalytic theory in her analyses of horror films. She turns the prevailing academic notion that the woman is feared because she is figuratively castrated on its head, arguing instead that women are feared because they can literally castrate. The monstrous feminine embraces all “of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject,” including the castrating females seen in both *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*. In spite of this portrayal, Creed argues that *I Spit on Your Grave* is “still

⁵¹ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 143.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 143-44.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

misogynistic in its representation of woman” because of the sexual nature of Jennifer’s revenge.⁵⁵ Though I do not take up the psychoanalytic perspective that Creed espouses in any detail, her analysis of *I Spit On Your Grave* has been key in developing the perspective from which I analyze rape-revenge.

In *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, Jacinda Read presents the case for rape-revenge as a “narrative structure which, on meeting the discourses of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced a historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films.”⁵⁶ The most significant work specifically on this sub-genre to date, Read further argues that the hyphen bridging the two words ‘rape’ and ‘revenge’ “directs us towards the way in which these films can also be read as an attempt to bridge, and thus make sense of, these gaps”⁵⁷ - between the feminine and the feminist, the victim and the avenger, the personal and the political. Read further argues that what has been typified as the backlash against feminist thought represented by these films might be better understood as “a process of negotiation and transformation”⁵⁸ of cultural norms and ideals. However, first published in 2000, Read’s *The New Avengers* is roughly ten years early, missing the phenomenon of the rape-revenge remake. Additionally, Read’s desire to analyze the movies Clover avoids, what she terms the “repressed,” leads to an incomplete analysis of rape-revenge. Her focus on films⁵⁹ focusing on the “residual rather than a dominant deployment of the rape-revenge

⁵⁵ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2001), 129.

⁵⁶ Read, *The new avengers*, 241.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Read focuses on films like *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *Batman Returns* (1992), and *The Last Seduction* (1994).

structure” ignores many key texts in the development of rape-revenge’s history.⁶⁰ In many ways, my thesis can be understood, then, as testing Read’s argument by engaging with both the cultural product and its context in order to analyze the contours of this process of negotiation.

In addition to Jacinda Read’s exploration of feminism and femininity in the context of rape-revenge films, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’ *Rape-Revenge Films* (2011) provides an exhaustive treatment of the genre and forms an important resource for my own work. Where Read focuses on a very few number of films, Heller-Nicholas explores the rape-revenge canon more expansively. Heller-Nicholas categorizes *I Spit On Your Grave* and *Last House on the Left* as a sub-genre of horror, and her additional claim that the rape-revenge narrative is widespread is well supported. This thesis focuses primarily on the former claim. However, the limitation to such an ambitious text is that many of the finer points of analysis are glossed over. Heller-Nicholas engages briefly with the differences between the remakes and originals of *I Spit On Your Grave* and *Last House on the Left*, arguing that the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave* is a “turn to ‘torture porn’ aesthetic”, although she does not clearly define what this means. While she does assert that the films reflect their different contexts and politics, she does not go into detail as to how they do this. This thesis attempts to add to Heller-Nicholas’ analysis by providing details about the films’ interaction with their cultural and political contexts.

Also key to the development of this thesis is Sarah Projansky’s *Watching Rape*, which explores representations of rape in American film and television from 1980 to the present. Projansky argues that “the pervasiveness of representations of rape naturalizes

⁶⁰ Read, *The new avengers*, 14.

rape's place in our everyday world, not only as real physical events but also as part of our fantasies, fears, desires and consumptive practices."⁶¹ *Watching Rape* tackles the difficult question of how representations of rape and feminism have changed over time, focusing primarily on the intersection(s) of rape and postfeminism. In doing so, Projansky argues that there is "a need to be vigilant ... about identifying and challenging representations of rape" in the hopes that this opens a space for media criticism and anti-rape activism. This awareness, she argues, is necessary to foster an understanding that "the overwhelming presence of rape in our representational world does not function only to debilitate, frighten, and confine."⁶² The representation of rape provides a space to bridge film analysis with real-life activism in the hopes of lessening instances of sexual violence and thus, representation of it. However, as Projansky herself notes, this effectively creates "a feminist paradox between a desire to *end* rape and a need to *represent* (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it."⁶³ Projansky's argument is that feminist analyses of rape films can be potential sites for activism against sexual violence because they make a taboo issue visible, but that in order to end rape we must engage in debates about it. Rape-revenge is a key genre in representing this paradox, which can be seen as both advocating feminist stories but also perpetuating rape in the telling and showing of it. Much like Read's conceptualization of rape-revenge as bridging the personal and the political, Projansky (and myself) battle with the central problem of female power in rape-revenge: in order to become the surviving, independent, female, the woman must first be victimized. How does one bring together the personal and the

⁶¹ Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3, original emphasis.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 236.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

political without sacrifice – and in the case of rape-revenge, is the female body the object of that sacrifice? How do audience members and feminist critics allow for this sacrifice, and this paradox? Projansky's *Watching Rape* is invaluable to this thesis because of this central question. Additionally, *Watching Rape* provides a feminist history of rape in film until 1979, as well as an analysis of changing conceptions of postfeminism from 1980 onwards.

In addition to the scholarly media analysis mentioned above, I also rely heavily on feminist history and rape reform movement texts. Not only do I engage with texts that provide an overview of the time-period, but I also use foundational feminist texts such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*. *Against Our Will*, first published in 1975, is an exhaustive treatment of rape in American history. It was one of the first popularly consumed texts articulating the belief that rape was a crime of violence and power rather than lust. It also promoted a pro-victim, rather than victim blaming, perspective that specifically argued that rape was never the victim's fault. In it Brownmiller tracks the notion of women as property through history, investigating rape in wartime, in concert with issues of race, and against institutions and the authorities. She confronts rape stereotypes or myths about both the victim and perpetrator. This includes the assumption that women lie about rape (consenting and then recanting that consent because they regret their actions) and invite or deserve rape (by their actions or clothing), and that when rape happens, rapists are usually unknown to their victims. Brownmiller concludes her text by asserting the need for women to fight not only the act of rape itself, but also the spread of

its ideology both individually and collectively.⁶⁴ This text supplies invaluable comprehensive evidence of the history of rape, but also provides much information about feminism in the 1970s in particular.

Texts that focus on representations of men are also useful for this thesis, including *Shadows of Doubt*, Barry Keith Grant's exploration of masculinity in American film genres. Sally Robinson's *Marked Men*, also provides a good picture of the post-sixties cultural flux, including the "decentering of white masculinity and the parallel rise of identity politics."⁶⁵

Conclusion

In January 2011, Julie Bindel of *The Guardian* re-evaluated her negative response to *I Spit On Your Grave* after seeing the remake. This reaction to *I Spit On Your Grave* encapsulates the divide between feminists on the issue of rape-revenge films. Although she initially picketed the original for equating rape with entertainment, her most recent reaction suggests that her vitriol has faded with time; in fact, she refers to the second act of the remade film as "the most delicious revenge."⁶⁶ What is intriguing about Bindel's reaction to *I Spit On Your Grave* is the way in which she now believes it to be feminist. She writes: "I still believe both versions of ISOYG to be more feminist – albeit in a

⁶⁴ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1975), 404.

⁶⁵ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 4.

⁶⁶ Julie Bindel, "Rape films vs realism," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2011, accessed June 30, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/19/wrong-about-spit-on-your-grave>.

purely accidental way – than *The Accused*, the much-lauded film starring Jodie Foster.”⁶⁷

⁶⁸ Bindel asserts that each film represents a message or a warning to men:

Whereas *The Accused* serves as a warning to men who do nothing to stop rape, the punishment they receive in the film is highly unlikely to happen in reality. The revenge meted out in ISOYG, however, is something men should fear. It does not rely on the law of the land, but on a woman being pushed too far and deciding enough is enough.⁶⁹

She further implies that part of the film’s feminist discourse is a warning “men should fear” because the lead character is not “sitting here fantasizing about being saved by crusading lawyers and nice men.”⁷⁰ For Bindel, if forced to choose between the two films, *I Spit On Your Grave* offers “the most comfort” because the narrative allows for female agency and power in ways that the narrative of *The Accused*, with its recourse to the legal system at large, does not.⁷¹ Bindel argues that *I Spit On Your Grave* represents a more realistic narrative because, in fact, real women do exist who have decided, “enough is enough”, whereas *The Accused* portrays a utopian trial. Finally, Bindel argues that the difference between the two films can be explained by looking at the contexts in which they were produced: “The feminist movement was at its height when ISOYG was made in 1978 ... and arguably at its weakest at the time of *The Accused*, when Thatcherism had more or less destroyed the left and weakened feminism alongside it.”⁷² Although I am not

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *The Accused* is based on a real-life story of a woman who takes her rapists to court against all odds. It accurately represents the real life events, except for the crucial fact that the courtroom triumph of the film is fabricated. In the film, the onlookers of the rape are convicted of criminal solicitation, where, in actuality, the men were acquitted of any wrongdoing. See “‘They Did Worse Than Nothing’: Rape and Spectatorship in *The Accused*” in Tanya Horeck’s *Public Rape* (2004).

⁶⁹ Bindel, “Rape films versus realism.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

concerned with labeling *I Spit On Your Grave* or *Last House on the Left* as feminist, Bindel's recent article exemplifies the importance of evaluating cinema through a historical and feminist perspective. It also illustrates that debates about the nature and effects of mainstream representations of women are far from resolved.

My thesis provides an opportunity to engage with these perspectives and concerns; it works to address historical and current notions of feminism and femininity via an examination of the relationship between the textual and the social within the genre of rape-revenge. Given the increasing reliance on old films to provide stories for new, and wider audiences, it is important to acknowledge and dissect how a change in context produces a different film. Through content and historical analysis, I will argue that the contradictory discourses present in society are reflected in the original *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave* films, and that the remakes of these films accentuate differences in how feminism, femininity, and rape are understood within the very different sociocultural climate today.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The originals and remakes of *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave* span almost four decades, encompassing the last quarter of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century. This time frame involves substantial changes in the social, political, and cultural landscape of the United States. Some of these changes include the rise of second-wave feminism, followed by both a backlash against feminism and the evolution of postfeminist discourse, the ending of the Vietnam War, the rise of the New Right, the politics of neoliberalism, the events of 9/11, and the invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan post-9/11. Situating these films in their historical contexts will enable a better understanding of the ways these films negotiate the changing meanings of feminism and femininity in the culture at large. This chapter describes the significant historical events that were occurring as these films were made in order to guide this thesis' assessment of these films' relationship to feminism in general.

In relating this historical context, this thesis utilizes the wave metaphor popular in feminist history. Though some argue that the wave metaphor limits understanding of the fluidity of feminism, it does allow us to easily understand and periodize feminist thinking.⁷³ First wave feminism encompasses the period of women's suffrage (1848-1920); second wave feminism begins in the early 1950s and lasts until the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1982; and the third wave is seen to begin in the early 1980s and continues into the present. Given that the release of the films in question

⁷³ Susan Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 5-8.

occurred during the second and third wave periods, this historical analysis will deal exclusively with feminism from 1960 forward.

The original *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), while only 6 years apart, are located at very different historical moments. In order to set the stage for what the United States looked like during both periods, I will first briefly discuss the countercultural movement of the 1960s. Then, I will introduce second-wave feminism overall before showing how the movement changed from 1972 and 1978. Following this, I will address the early twenty-first century as the context for both *Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010).

The Originals

In 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States; in 1963, he was assassinated. For many Americans, the President's assassination affirmed an ever-widening cultural division between older and younger generations.⁷⁴ Gair attributes this to the sense of possibility Kennedy represented (particularly for youth culture), as well his vigor and sophistication. This division was central to the development of a radical, political counterculture whose aim had grown from a civil rights movement to include a rebellion against the Vietnam War and bring an end to what they saw as the violence of an unjust and imperialistic war. In support of this political movement with its explicit questioning of all forms of authority, the large cohort of youth born following the end of WWII increasingly rebelled against the established social mores of 1950s America. These

⁷⁴ Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007), 122-3.

values included a traditional heterosexual family home with a male head of household, a subservient, stay-at-home wife, and docile children.

As the 1960s progressed, radical organizations and those in the hippie counterculture formed a 'New Left', a larger countercultural and revolutionary movement which protested for free speech, civil and student rights, and against the Vietnam War. The anti-war movement, especially, gained momentum, in part because of the number of young men affected by the draft, although it remained fractured along race and class lines.⁷⁵ Those who did not support the New Left saw the counterculture as being against "working-class American ideals based on patriotism and self-improvement."⁷⁶ Indeed, a key element of the countercultural movement was its rejection of conservative values inherent in "the novelty of materialization and structured lives" of the 1950s; the radical counterculture prized free expression, love, and happiness.⁷⁷ Popular culture drew from and reproduced these notions, with many musicians and movie stars becoming faces of the revolution.⁷⁸

Though much of the counterculture was politically motivated, it was also defined by social changes on a local and widespread level.⁷⁹ Drug use, specifically LSD and marijuana, became more open,⁸⁰ and sexual activity was liberalized. In direct contrast to the nuclear family homes of the 1950s, 1960s youths appreciated the notion of communal, and decidedly unstructured, living. A huge part of this radical notion was

⁷⁵ Ibid., 126-7.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁷ Andrew J. Atchison and Kathleen M. Heide, "Charles Manson and the Family: The Application of Sociological Theories to Multiple Murder," *SAGE Publications* 55:5 (2011): 772, doi: 10.1177/0306624X10371794.

⁷⁸ Examples include Jimi Hendrix, Arlo Guthrie, Janis Joplin, and the Grateful Dead.

⁷⁹ Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 131.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 134.

sexual liberation and “free love,”⁸¹ in which “the women’s movement and changes in the understanding of female sexuality played a central role.”⁸² Prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, female sexuality was intimately tied to childbirth, which was ideally connected to marriage. As more women entered the workforce (allowing more women economic independence) and the marriage age rose, sex became an activity for single as well as married women. As early as 1960, the development of the birth control pill revolutionized reproductive control, allowing women personal control over their bodies and sex life. Not only did the pill change conceptions of female sexuality from something strictly tied to childbirth, but it also allowed married women the option to do more than act as child bearer and nurturer, something that early marriage and unreliable methods of birth control exacerbated during the 1950s. Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl*, an advice book that championed economically and sexually independent single women, was an international bestseller and became “an unlikely manifesto of sexual adventure for the unmarried woman.”⁸³ At the same time, Hugh Hefner’s hugely influential publication, *Playboy* (launched in the 1950s), made clear how women’s sexual liberation would facilitate the lifestyle aspirations of men.

Though the sexual revolution undoubtedly had some positive influence on perceptions of female sexuality and female sexual power in general, it also provided an important base for the emerging critiques of second-wave feminism. Many young women involved in countercultural movements, including civil rights or anti-war protests, “found

⁸¹ Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 4.

⁸² Jeffrey Escoffier, ed., *Sexual Revolution* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), 67.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 68.

themselves politically marginalized and under pressure to engage in sex with male activists.”⁸⁴ In response, feminists began to form their own organizations and produce their own literature in the late 1960s that addressed the “social and sexual drawbacks experienced by women.”⁸⁵ As a result, control of their own sexuality was “for a moment ... at the center of women’s impending liberation,” despite differing opinions between feminists about what female sexual pleasure was or signified.⁸⁶ Radical feminists, in particular, saw sexuality as important because it was “the raw material out of which standards of womanhood were forged,” driving debates about female health, relationships with partners, socialization, and gender relations as a whole.⁸⁷

Women’s bodies, specifically, became the focus of varying feminist debates. In addition to the developing anti-rape movement, feminists who argued against pornography and heterosexual sex in general focused on how the female body had become the specific site through which women’s oppression was justified and manifested. In part as a way of addressing these concerns, women’s sexual health became a centerpiece issue. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1970, was the foundational text for those feminists who argued against patriarchal bias within medicine and specifically the way in which women’s bodies were medicalized and often pathologized in institutional medicine. For these feminist women accepting and articulating female

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3.

difference was empowering.⁸⁸ *Our Bodies, Ourselves* offered all women an alternative source of information by explaining to them how their bodies worked and how they could care for themselves. These feminists, including celebrated feminist poet Adrienne Rich, posited that knowledge about women's bodies equaled control, and fought against patriarchal ideologies shaping female biology, physicality, and sexuality.⁸⁹ Women's health activism during the 1960s and early 1970s included securing access safe abortions (which continued to be illegal), non-traumatic pelvic exams, birth control, and family planning.⁹⁰ A consequence of the intersection of the sexual revolution and the second-wave feminist movement was that "[a]cross the cultural landscape ...[women's] sexuality became linked to identity and utopian visions of a better way to live."⁹¹

While the liberation of women's bodies was a key feature of the developing second-wave feminist movement, the movement also worked for equality within the family and in the workplace. Major second-wave feminist efforts of the 1960s included the Equal Pay Act (1963) and Title VII (1964), which barred discrimination in the workforce on the basis of sex. Both of these rulings allowed women further economic independence and power, laying the groundwork for continuing liberal feminist efforts in securing equality into the 1970s. The period of the 1960s was also marked by the creation of the Commission on Status of Women (in 1961), which was originally designed to give information to the President on a range of women's issues including education and employment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was created in

⁸⁸ Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41, 96, 127.

⁹¹ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 4.

1965 to administer Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Two years later, in direct response to the burgeoning feminism movement, the National Organization for Women (NOW), with 300 charter members, was organized, and selected Betty Friedan, author of the ground-breaking feminist book, *The Feminine Mystique*, as its President.⁹²

Although the women's liberation movement was gathering strength in the 1960s, it was not immune to its own political infighting. While the most well-known form of feminism, often identified as liberal feminism, was focused around white middle-class women who "could afford... to see their oppression as located solely at the intersection of sexuality and gender,"⁹³ different kinds of feminism were also emerging. Indeed, new branches splintered from NOW within a year of its establishment. Different feminist tracks, including lesbian and black feminism, continued to emerge as the movement intensified throughout the decade. Radical feminists were more extreme in their positions and tactics, using consciousness-raising and speakouts to "analyze, politicize and publicize the personal and potentially offensive issues in women's lives."⁹⁴ In this way, radical feminists "politicized the identity category 'woman'" and worked to reinvent the category of "woman" completely.⁹⁵ As mentioned above, these feminists saw sexuality as the key site of women's oppression. Women of colour, however, faced oppression on multiple fronts, not the least of which was racism from white feminists. For feminists of colour, racism was a more vital concern than sexuality.⁹⁶ With the rise of gay liberation

⁹² "The Founding of NOW," National Organization for Women, last modified July 2011, http://www.now.org/history/the_founding.html.

⁹³ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 4.

⁹⁴ Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 30.

⁹⁵ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 101.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

during this time, lesbian feminism also became more prominent. The “lavender menace,” a derogatory term coined by Betty Freidan, marked yet another rupture in the feminist movement.⁹⁷ These multiple strands of feminism illustrate the fact that not all women shared the same experiences of oppression.

In 1968, the New York Radical Women (NYRW) organized a now infamous protest against the Miss America Pageant, which, feminists argued, perpetuated the female beauty myth and the stereotype of women as submissive.⁹⁸ Despite noble goals, this protest acted as both a unifying and divisive force for feminism; it gained “early visibility and membership” for the second-wave feminist movement, but also added bra-burning to the feminist mythos, when, in fact, this act never actually occurred.⁹⁹ The protest encouraged women to deposit items like bras, magazines, makeup, and high heels in ‘freedom trash can’, but the trash can was not set on fire. In spite of this, popular media latched onto the idea of the “bra-burning feminist,” and the image continues to haunt feminism to this day. In “Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology,” Bonnie Dow argues that the media utilized rhetoric and decontextualized images of feminists to trivialize and vilify the feminist movement as a whole, reducing the movement to psychosocial acting out: “Bra burning, it was implied, was the desperate bid for attention by neurotic, unattractive women who could not garner it through more acceptable routes.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 93.

⁹⁸ Bonnie J. Dow, “Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6.1 (2003): 128.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 129.

Though the incident surrounding the Miss America Pageant was a protest against the beauty myth as a site of women's oppression, and the media's role in perpetuating it, this event set the stage for the fully-fledged feminist movement now beginning to take shape to get media attention.¹⁰¹ In addition to the protest itself, a consciousness-raising meeting was also held about the pageant, establishing a now familiar model for feminist organizing. Rejecting the notion that "this same culture which expects aggression from the male expects passivity from the female,"¹⁰² radical feminists utilized overt, rebellious tactics, like the Miss America protest as a way to fight what they perceived to be "a kind of terrorism which severely limits the freedom of women and makes women dependent on men."¹⁰³ In keeping with this tradition, the New York radical feminist group Redstockings held the first "speak out" on abortion in 1969, which kick-started the politicization of taboo subjects.

The critiques of white male privilege that were part of second wave feminist and civil rights movements, combined with the impact of the Vietnam War, challenged hegemonic American masculinity precipitating what some men have termed a *crisis* of masculinity.¹⁰⁴ Female liberation, particularly perceptions of their increased sexual autonomy, produced an intensified focus in the popular media about male impotence.¹⁰⁵ The popular magazine *Mademoiselle* ran a feature in 1972 entitled "The Sexual Confusion," which detailed the ways in which changing sex roles had led to a large

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁰² Susan Griffin, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 6.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁴ Sally Robinson, "'Emotional Constipation' and the Power of Damned Masculinity: *Deliverance* and the Paradoxes of Male Liberation," in *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New York: Routledge, 2001), 133.

¹⁰⁵ Lehman, *Those Girls*, 210.

number of under-thirty males experiencing impotence.¹⁰⁶ As single females were increasingly asserting their sexual freedom, single men were reportedly “feeling emasculated and defensive as their role as active participants in a sex relationship was usurped.”¹⁰⁷ Sexual liberation meant women were supposed to be more sexually available for men, but women’s sexual autonomy required for men to perform under changed circumstances, and, for some women, men were rendered irrelevant entirely. Young, single, sexually liberated women were viewed by some as asking to be harmed due to their “risky, aggressive sexual behavior and self-destructive nature.”¹⁰⁸ This fed into already established attitudes about rape in which women were seen to be ‘asking for’ sexual assault by behaving or dressing in a certain manner. Katherine Lehman notes that this was particularly apparent in early 1970s New York news reports, which argued that middle-class families were losing their daughters to a world defined by sex and drugs.¹⁰⁹ A key aspect of the cultural zeitgeist of the time period was the repetition of stories of young, middle-class Americans lost to a world of drugs and sex. One of the “must read” books of the early 1970s was *Go Ask Alice*, which purported to be the diary of a 15 year old, middle class girl who succumbs to these dangers while living in a big city. Aspects of it are eerily similar to *Last House on the Left* (1972), where the lead character is raped and murdered after going to the city for a concert and seeking out drugs. Additionally, in *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), the lead character, Jennifer, is a middle-class, single New Yorker who is raped by men who believe that she must be promiscuous because she is from New York.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 215.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 216.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 216-217.

The 1970s also saw the rise of men's liberationists in direct response to the second-wave feminist movement. Herb Goldberg, author of *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege* (1975), claimed, "white, middle-class heterosexual men [were] both literally and metaphorically wounded."¹¹⁰ "White male minds and bodies [are] at risk," Goldberg argues, with men suffering from "ulcers, cancer, mental breakdown, and pain."¹¹¹ Thus, there was a perspective that women's rights were directly and palpably harming masculinity, and the male position in society as a whole. Sally Robinson explores masculinity, and this idea of "men in crisis," in the aftermath of the Vietnam War as represented in the film *Deliverance* (1972).¹¹² She argues that the film is less about the rape of one of its male leads and more about the "contradictory imperatives" of the expression and repression of emotional and sexual impulses facing contemporary men.¹¹³ Robinson argues that masculine repression of so-called natural impulses more generally is represented as being expressed through the male body as susceptible "either to psychological and physical damage or to violent explosions."¹¹⁴

In *Deliverance*, Robinson argues, the male body "in personal and bodily terms" represents socio-historical trauma like the crisis of white masculinity seen to be the result of movements like second-wave feminism, and the Vietnam War.¹¹⁵ In 1972, however,

¹¹⁰ Sally Robinson, "'Emotional Constipation'," 134.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Based on the 1970 novel and directed by John Boorman, *Deliverance* tells the story of four men on a canoe trip up a Georgia river. Angry locals assault the group, raping one member and later murdering another. The latter half of the film is devoted to the group's attempt to escape the locals.

¹¹³ Robinson, "'Emotional Constipation'," 134.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

the War was still ongoing, and the United States was doing poorly. The unrelenting violence and high number of American deaths contributed to societal trauma, which is reflected in films of the time period. In short, cinema in during and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War tended to tell stories about the repressed, defeated male.¹¹⁶ *Deliverance*, in particular, utilizes one character's rape as a narrative trigger for repression whereby "men [do] not speak of a 'feminizing' trauma and a naturalized, even biological impulse toward the expression of male rage" results.¹¹⁷ For the rest of the narrative, *Deliverance* portrays its characters as symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder locked in a constant struggle to overcome physical and emotional trauma. This diagnosis emerges out of (and is named in relation to) men's experiences in Vietnam, which was previously called shell-shock. The focus on both physical and mental effects of war is also represented in such films as *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Coming Home*, all released in 1978.

The mental and societal effects of war are also evident in *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*.¹¹⁸ I will argue that these texts can be understood reflecting "post-war trauma", because of their tendency to repeat what Morag identifies as "a split in the father figure between the positive father and the negative father"; the former is a role model for traditional American, male values while the latter involves a threatening and incoherent masculinity.¹¹⁹ Arguably, *Last House on the Left* (1972) deals with the effects of feminism, violence, and the counterculture on a familial and societal level, while *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) depicts the crisis of masculinity as a result of the

¹¹⁶ See Sally Robinson and Raya Morag.

¹¹⁷ Robinson, "'Emotional Constipation'," 140.

¹¹⁸ Raya Morag, "Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War," *The Communication Review* 9 (2006): 190-191.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

Vietnam War. In 1972, the United States was still a presence in Vietnam and, while struggling, had not yet been defeated; however, by 1978, 3 years after the fall of Saigon, the United States had become a superpower that could not win a land war in a small Asian country. The particular ways in which each film represents the trauma of the Vietnam War will be explored further in Chapters 3 and 4.

During the 1970s, feminists involved in the anti-rape effort argued that natural male sexual impulses were “dangerously *expressive* of violent emotions and sexuality,” which led to the constant threat of rape.¹²⁰ Also during this time period, popular misconceptions about rape abounded, including the view that a desire for domination and control was a natural impulse. Existing victim-blaming rhetoric and imagery that suggested that a woman “asked for it” by behaving and dressing in a certain way compounded the feminist anti-rape effort which struggled to dispel the myth that men simply could not help themselves. Goldberg, however, argued that it was the (feminist) blockage of natural impulses that created the threat of rape, “construct[ing] [a] hysterical male body through which substantial male energies circulate without proper outlet.”¹²¹

The Anti-Rape Movement

One of the first demonstrations of the anti-rape movement occurred in 1971 at the New York Radical Feminists’ speakout on rape. This was the first time a group of women gathered together publicly to tell their stories and experiences of rape. These testimonies included experiences of victim-blaming and legal problems, and worked to break the silence and shame associated with rape victimization. In *Rape: The Power of*

¹²⁰ Robinson, “‘Emotional Constipation,’” 140.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

Consciousness, Susan Griffin eloquently states the way in which testimony like this broke through social norms:

We did not speak of rape. If a woman was raped she was supposed to feel ashamed. She *was* shamed. The very atmosphere around her said that she had been violated and damaged like property, that she must have wanted this rape, drawn this to her. And the atmosphere, like rape itself, seemed as if it had existed forever, was a natural phenomenon, and not made up of man-made assumptions and prejudices born of a particular social reality.¹²²

The speakout carved a safe space in which women were allowed to speak as rape survivors without fear of unfair questioning or reproach. This was one of the first public actions of the anti-rape movement and it worked to take “the blame for the crime off [women’s] own shoulders and place it squarely on the shoulders of the rapists.”¹²³ This event set the stage for many speakouts to come, and entrenched consciousness-raising as a central strategy of the feminist movement. By utilizing testimony grounded in the very real female experience of rape, women began to mobilize and fight against biased rape laws, which as of the early 1970s still included requiring a witness, proof of penetration (evidence of the woman’s violated virginity or the presence of semen), and proof of non-consent.¹²⁴ These laws, and the extant rape myths, including victim-blaming, provided ample evidence for the feminist belief that rape was a societal problem founded in patriarchy and widespread misogyny: “Feminists... redefined violence against women, refusing to accept violent acts as isolated incidents and happenstance and putting them instead into the context of male domination and power in society.”¹²⁵

¹²² Griffin, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness*, 24.

¹²³ Judith Harlan, *Feminism: a reference handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 122.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

As a result, rape became a centerpiece feminist issue alongside abortion, the women's health movement, and employment opportunities:

The new feminist movement, and the wider context of social and political activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s not only set the stage for the anti-rape movement's emergence, but also afforded it a base from which to start, including people, ideas, organizations, and models.¹²⁶

The early 1970s also saw a rise in mass media coverage of the anti-rape movement, providing “even more attention to the problem and the new politicization of it.”¹²⁷ This was almost entirely due to the efforts and organization of radical feminists, in particular New York Radical Feminists, who addressed the issue in 1973, a full three years before NOW.¹²⁸ Liberal feminism, in contrast, mobilized a task force devoted to the anti-rape effort beginning in 1974, but the effort was suspended in 1978 to concentrate on the embattled Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).¹²⁹ Despite this, the anti-rape movement gained momentum and was able to unify around a pro-victim, rather than an implicit or explicitly victim-blaming, perspective. The problem of rape mobilized a collective force, bringing “together ideologically diverse feminists determined to prevent or eradicate it.”¹³⁰ This collective action, primarily focused on changing legislation and political agendas, defined the latter half of the 1970s anti-rape movement. Though this road was not an easy one, “actors in the anti-rape movement were hard at work advancing policies that were gentle on victims and tough on assailants, [and] their legislative proposals often

¹²⁶ Nancy A. Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16.

¹²⁷ Bevacqua, *Rape on the public agenda*, 122.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 32, 36.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 109.

appealed both to feminist activists and to policy makers.”¹³¹ For example, in 1974, the Women’s Anti-Rape Coalition successfully lobbied to repeal the corroboration law, which required evidence other than the testimony of the rape victim to be present in order to find a defendant guilty of rape.

Though “[feminists] assumed that women were in a state of constant danger from male violence,”¹³² larger social anxieties played a part in the anti-rape movement. As we have seen, gender relations were in flux, and female sexuality, as well as sexual autonomy, was in question. These debates were preoccupied with the female body, and the right(s) and dignities afforded to it by society. Feminists succeeded in making sexual violence, including rape, domestic violence, incest and sexual harassment, a central political issue in the early 1970s, and fought “to continue to raise consciousness about sexual assault and to locate its meaning in a political context of sexism.”¹³³

As early as 1969, Boston radical feminist group Cell 16 mobilized anti-rape forces by emphasizing the importance of self-defense. In the group’s journal, *No More Fun and Games*, articles were frequently devoted to “advocat[ing] physical strength rather than ‘feminine’ weakness, self-sufficiency in place of dependency and so-called protection, and aggressiveness instead of passivity.”¹³⁴ Its slogan, “‘It must become as dangerous to attack a woman as to attack another man ... epitomizes ... martial arts,

¹³¹ Ibid., 119.

¹³² Stephanie Gilmore, “Strange Bedfellows: Building Feminist Coalitions around Sex Work in the 1970s,” in Hewitt, 246.

¹³³ Matthews, *Confronting Rape*, 3.

¹³⁴ Bevacqua, *Rape on the public agenda*, 44.

militancy, and aggression as self-defense.”¹³⁵ It is important to note that Cell 16 specifically advocated the use of violence as a way of stopping rape.

Though perhaps the strongest proponent in its use of violence as a preventive measure against rape, Cell 16 was not the only anti-rape effort to focus on self-defense. Self-defense classes, geared towards women fighting sexual violence, became increasingly available and acceptable as rape became a less taboo subject. Additionally, literature outlined “particular techniques and offer(ed) rape-avoidance advice ... includ[ing] the basics of how to walk more safely at night, deliver a punch, deflect a blow, and turn ordinary objects into weapons.”¹³⁶ Popular feminist texts also reflected this turn to self-defense and aggression. Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will* argued that women had been deliberately prevented from acquiring knowledge of self-defense, making it not only necessary but also vital that women should be exposed to “systematic training in self-defense that begins in childhood.”¹³⁷ The assumption underlying this approach is that a system rooted in patriarchy will always produce rapists; thus, women must be prepared in order to defend themselves.

The anti-rape movement flourished, its fundamental distrust of government leading to a consensus-based approach that fought for “law enforcement behavior and legal changes, hospital practices and counseling, self-defense and community education.”¹³⁸ The movement was collectivist insofar as it was “composed of networks constructed through personal contacts and publications,” many of which were members

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹³⁷ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1975), 403.

¹³⁸ Matthews, *Confronting Rape*, xiii, 15.

of the larger feminist movement.¹³⁹ The scope of the anti-rape movement changed with time, and, with the influx of government funds, eventually transformed into a variety of service-based organizations in the late 1970s.

By 1972, the year of *Last House on the Left*'s original release, the first rape crisis hotline was established in Washington, D.C., with more appearing across the nation in years following. In concert with the development of local organizations, the national anti-rape movement also grew. In 1974, the Feminist Alliance Against Rape (FAAR) was founded "for the purpose of better communication and visibility of the movement."¹⁴⁰ However, despite increased government funding in the late 1970s, the anti-rape movement never forgot its consciousness-raising, activist foundations, which had been designed "by radical feminists ... to be grassroots, run by women, non-hierarchical, empowering, do-it-yourself, and democratic."¹⁴¹

Backlash Against Feminism & the Anti-Pornography Movement

In the early 1970s, particularly after *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in 1973, a backlash against feminism was growing within the culture at large. At this time, American society was taking two steps back from feminism and "the excesses of the sexual revolution."¹⁴² At the same time, the pornographic film industry became prominent and more culturally acceptable.¹⁴³ *Playboy*, launched in 1953, was very popular, and led to an increase in other pornographic magazines like *Penthouse* (first published in 1969). Cinematic sexuality was not solely labeled porn – many Hollywood

¹³⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 15-17.

¹⁴² Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 151.

¹⁴³ Debbie Nathan, *Pornography* (Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2007), 24-5.

films utilized hardcore sex within their narrative, including *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972).¹⁴⁴ Outside of Hollywood cinema, pornography also saw a steep rise in popularity and by 1973 the US saw the release of *Deep Throat*, which earned \$50 million and brought porn into the mainstream for both men *and* women.¹⁴⁵ With the invention of VHS in 1975, the porn industry moved directly into the home, allowing access to more men and women, as well as making it easy for couples to participate in and create pornography together. Both supply and demand for pornography skyrocketed.¹⁴⁶

As the sexual revolution and feminism faced mounting opposition from the radical right, feminists continued to hold conferences – in 1974 and again in 1982 - on sexuality to debate “the meaning of sexual freedom and sexual liberation for women.”¹⁴⁷ Pornography became a key issue in this debate. The developing anti-pornography movement worked with the anti-rape movement to order to bring about the end violence against women, in part by exposing the connections between pornography and rape.¹⁴⁸ The focus on violence in pornography and mainstream media created tension between women in the movement, however. While some women felt that a focus on porn eclipsed the “real causes of sexism”¹⁴⁹ like victim-blaming legislation and societal ignorance, anti-porn feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argued that there was a direct connection between explicit, violent, sexual media and real-world sexual

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁴⁷ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 151.

¹⁴⁸ Bevacqua, *Rape on the public agenda*, 177.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

violence.¹⁵⁰ Pornography was seen as “the theory,” rape as “the practice.”¹⁵¹ 1976 saw the release of *Snuff*, a film purporting to be an actual filmed murder of a young girl for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Although the film was later proved to be a hoax, it launched a firestorm of curiosity and controversy. This largely unsubstantiated link between filmed sexual violence and real sexual violence haunted, and continues to haunt, films like *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*.

As the 70s moved forward in the wake of the social upheaval of the 60s, conservative family values (particularly the importance of the nuclear family home in raising children) began to gain ground once again, accompanied by restrictions on abortions and organized efforts against the ERA. Within four years of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, the Supreme Court backtracked its stance on abortion, disallowing Medicaid usage for abortions – “once again making abortion a privilege of those who could afford it.”¹⁵² In 1979, the moral majority, a political lobbyist group led by evangelical Christian Jerry Falwell, was founded, while Anita Bryant’s campaign against gay rights, which started in Florida in 1977, spread across the US. As a result of lobbying from within these other movements of the “New Right”, Republican Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States in 1980, answering the “call for a more morally restrained and

¹⁵⁰ In 1984, Dworkin and MacKinnon authored an ordinance for the Minneapolis City Council. This ordinance would allow women, particularly victims of sexual abuse, to take legal action against producers and purveyors of porn. Though vetoed by the mayor, this set the standard for further versions in Indiana, California, and Massachusetts. This series of legal efforts marked a point in which certain feminist concerns became aligned, and supported, by conservative anti-feminists.

¹⁵¹ Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of A Feminist* (New York: Random House), 1977.

¹⁵² Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 151.

responsible capitalism centered around family values.”¹⁵³ Both the New Right and the moral majority “aimed to reform American culture, which [they] believed was declining as secular values replaced religious ones,” by upholding a “traditional patriarchal family headed by a breadwinning father and nurtured by a domestic mother.”¹⁵⁴ Feminism, gay liberation, and AIDS were all seen as an attack on normative gender roles, and by 1985, NOW’s membership had decreased by roughly 70,000 members.¹⁵⁵

The Remakes

Conservative Reaganite discourses “have been understood as instigating” the backlash against feminism that would characterize the late 1980s.¹⁵⁶ However, an additional, increasingly important challenge to feminism came through the development of through the development of ‘post-feminism,’ which can best be described as “the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism.”¹⁵⁷ Post-feminism is not monolithic and has changed as time has passed and a new third-wave feminist movement has developed with “most versions [of third-wave feminism]... function[ing] as either a condemnation or a celebration of women and feminism.”¹⁵⁸ Projansky asserts this is because of postfeminism’s many forms and the many ways in which it is expressed, which are discussed below.

¹⁵³ Jacinda Read, *The new avengers: Feminism, femininity and the rape-revenge cycle* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 177.

¹⁵⁴ Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 104.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁵⁶ Read, *The new avengers*, 243.

¹⁵⁷ Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 66.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

In the early 1980s, Projansky suggests, postfeminist discourse first emerged in popular media narratives, which posited second-wave feminism as promoting a “problematic ‘victim’ feminism.”¹⁵⁹ In the early 1990s, the burgeoning third-wave movement was also distancing itself from the second-wave, with prominent feminists like Naomi Wolf and Camille Paglia espousing ‘power feminism,’ and arguing that second-wave feminism did not celebrate female power or success. In contrast, power feminism “seeks to assuage the fears inspired by feminism’s threat to male authority, while renouncing the ... figure that 1970s feminism allegedly constructs as a fragile and passive (non)agent of male control.”¹⁶⁰

Other forms of postfeminist discourse, however, stress the importance of individualized, independent, and pro-sex feminism.¹⁶¹ By the 1990s, postfeminism emphasized the tension of a choice “among work, family, and dating/sexuality” with “sexual interaction with men as a core desire for women.”¹⁶² In short, this type of postfeminist discourse argued a woman should not have to choose between work, family, and relationships, and that she was defined by her (hetero)sexual desire and expression. These choices, postfeminist discourse suggests, are possible because the fight for equality that structured second wave feminism had been won. Postfeminist representations in this period primarily depict “angst over the lack of a husband/family combined with excessive displays of active sexuality.”¹⁶³ The most popular example is the television show *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), whose titular character is a young female lawyer struggling to

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁰ Aimee Carrillo Rowe, “Subject to Power – Feminism Without Victims,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 32:1 (2009): 12.

¹⁶¹ Projansky, *Watching Rape*, 66-67.

¹⁶² Ibid., 79.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 80.

balance relationships and career ambitions while maintaining a sexually active lifestyle.¹⁶⁴ Like Ally McBeal, the postfeminist woman is often represented as “perform[ing] femininity while simultaneously functioning independently and successfully in masculine arenas.”¹⁶⁵

In concert with postfeminism,¹⁶⁶ as well as in reaction to further feminist backlash in the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings¹⁶⁷, third-wave feminism flourished in the early 1990s.¹⁶⁸ In “Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism,” Amber E. Kinser explicitly defines third-wave feminism as:

the era of feminism rooted in and shaped by the mid '80s-new millennium political climate, thus allowing for the possibility that a feminist might affiliate with either or both [second-wave or third-wave feminism] and suggest[s] indirectly that different eras bring with them different constraints and possibilities for change.¹⁶⁹

She also notes that one of the greater goals of third-wave feminism “ha[s] been to look back at the most recent movement ... and consider how the choices that were made inform our lives.”¹⁷⁰ As a result, third-wave feminism decries the ways popular second-wave feminism was seen as exclusively white and heterosexual. In contrast, the third-wave represented, and continues to represent through organizations like the Third Wave Foundation, feminist activism across a broader spectrum, including those who are

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶⁶ Amber E. Kinser, “Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism,” *NWSA Journal* 16:3 (Autumn, 2004): 131.

¹⁶⁷ Clarence Thomas was accused by professor Anita Hill of sexual harassment during his confirmation hearings in 1991. The resulting (and highly controversial) case became a nationwide spectacle, with a backlash against feminism resulting as the nation argued over reality of sexual harassment in the workplace.

¹⁶⁸ Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 103.

¹⁶⁹ Kinser, “Negotiating Spaces,” 132, original emphasis.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 133.

marginalized by normative social values around gender, race, sexuality and class. Similar to its roots in second-wave feminism, the third-wave movement utilizes a communal, grassroots approach, making it explicit that non-conformity (non-white race, alternative gender or sexual expression(s), disability, etc.) provides the best perspective on how to achieve equality:

Third wave centers youth most impacted by inequity as the architects for community and systematic change. We make investments that recognize the resilience and leadership of young women, transgender, and gender non-confirming youth. We support this work – at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class – because we believe in justice and equity for all. The empirical evidence of grassroots, community based organizing shows us that those who have navigated society while facing interlocking oppressions have the clearest road map to freedom.¹⁷¹

An example of the third-wave acceptance of non-normative expressions of gender was in the Riot Grrrl movement, originating in Olympia and Washington, DC. This was a feminist rock and DIY scene formed in the early and mid-1990s to combat misogyny within music. Riot Grrrls produced aggressively confrontational bands, such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and others, who “conveyed not just a revolt against society but a new way of thinking about the capacities and ideas of girls and young women.”¹⁷² However, Riot Grrrl feminism was also criticized for having a predominantly white perspective and focus.¹⁷³ The third-wave also became known for ‘girlie feminism’, in part because it worked to reclaim traditional expressions of femininity, like short dresses and nail polish, while also being openly sexual.¹⁷⁴ Girlie feminism differs from post feminism because the former embraces classical expressions of femininity like cooking and using makeup

¹⁷¹ “Manifesto,” Third Wave Foundation, <http://www.thirdwavefoundation.org/about-us/>.

¹⁷² Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 119.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 121-22.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 123.

were important aspects of female history and feminism, whereas the latter disregards the necessity of feminist activity completely.

Post-9/11 & Beyond

On September 11, 2001, New York City and Washington, D.C. were attacked by the Islamist militant group al-Qaeda, lead by Osama bin Laden. Two airplanes were flown directly into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, which collapsed within two hours, while two other jets crashed into the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania. As a result of these attacks, President George W. Bush launched the 'War on Terror', which led to the invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq War.

Similar to those films outlined by Sally Robinson and others in relation to the Vietnam War, recent cultural texts post-9/11 and Iraq War can be seen to work with a decentered or otherwise fractured masculinity. Films like *Home of the Brave* (2006) and *Badland* (2007) explicitly deal with returning Iraq War veterans and their struggles to re-enter society. These films are strikingly similar to Vietnam War-era cinema like *The Deer Hunter* (1979) and *Coming Home* (1978) because of their representation of the brutal effects of war on the physical body, as well as the psyche.¹⁷⁵ However, unlike their earlier counterparts, the more recent films "seem unwilling to delve into the specific ambiguities and complexities of the Iraq War and the lives of its participants."¹⁷⁶ Because the war is on-going, films in the current time period are more comparable to films made in the early 1970s than those made once the United States was out of Vietnam. Whereas films like

¹⁷⁵ Jeanie Elenor Gosline, "Trapped: The Iraq War Veteran on Film," *Dissent* 55:3 (2008): 89.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

Taxi Driver (1976)¹⁷⁷ – and indeed, *Last House on the Left* (1972), as will be seen in the next chapter--derive their power “from the questions (they) raise about right and wrong – in war, in politics, and in the social order”; in opposition, popular cinema in the current period “chooses American heroism and exceptionalism as its ‘truth’.”^{178/179}

In contrast to the Vietnam War-era depictions of masculinity, films of the immediate pre- and post-9/11 era often portray the ways in which war “bolster[s] and confirm[s] masculinity.”¹⁸⁰ These films, arguably anticipated by *Independence Day* (1996), *Blackhawk Down* (2001), and *We Were Soldiers* (2002), which can be understood as exorcising the failures of Vietnam and the events in Somalia, include *Rescue Dawn* (2006), *The Kingdom* (2007), and *Green Zone* (2010). The American government has become a force in Hollywood by directly providing support of cinema that represents a particular, positive point of view of the military forces. The depiction of the United States as once again a powerful masculine force at this time was seen as “a story of masculine heroism many Americans needed to hear.”¹⁸¹

Just as the Vietnam War “marked a crisis point for contemporary fears” in the sixties and seventies, so does the Iraq War in the 2000s.¹⁸² This crisis is not simply that the United States “might be in danger of losing its disembodied masculine integrity and

¹⁷⁷ Directed by Martin Scorsese and set in New York City, the film follows Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro), an ex-Marine night shift cab driver. Depressed and battling insomnia, Bickle is obsessed with the seedy parts of New York and society to the point that he begins taking revenge on a sick society, focused through saving a 12-year-old prostitute (Jodie Foster). The film ends with Bickle labeled a hero, despite his illegal actions.

¹⁷⁸ Gosline, “Trapped,” 90.

¹⁷⁹ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 178.

¹⁸⁰ Brenda M. Boyle, “Rescuing Masculinity: Captivity, Rescue and Gender in American War Narratives,” *The Journal of American Culture* 34:2 (2011): 149.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁸² Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 115.

succumbing to an overly embodied, feminine vulnerability.”¹⁸³ In much the same way that the “public culture framed the Vietnam War as disrupting the nation’s imagined identity and prevailing gender norms,” the Iraq War marks a time period in which American power has become couched “in the language of trauma and injury.”¹⁸⁴ In particular, how American power was violated against its will during the terrorist attacks of 9/11 is understood to lead to what some would argue are dramatic displays of militaristic force in order to regain control of an American narrative now defined by feminized injury. Moreover, in doing so, the Bush Administration used feminist rhetoric to justify the American government’s actions in invading Afghanistan and Iraq by claiming it intended to ‘liberate’ the women there from oppressive patriarchal regimes.¹⁸⁵ The underlying justification here is such that masculinity, and masculine narratives overall, are deeply rooted in saving, or otherwise exerting control over the feminine. This positioning of the United States as savior is problematic for several reasons, most importantly because it represents America as a masculine force rescuing females from ill-treatment and violence and re-inscribes a view of America as “masculinist protector of women’s rights around the world,”¹⁸⁶ while tacitly suggesting that the domestic feminism is no longer necessary.¹⁸⁷ *Last House on the Left* (2009)

¹⁸³ Ibid., 115-116.

¹⁸⁴ Claire Sisco-King, *Washed In Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 43-44.

¹⁸⁵ Michaele L. Ferguson & Lori Jo Marso, ed., *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁸⁶ R. Claire Snyder, “The Allure of Authoritarianism: Bush Administration Ideology and the Reconsolidation of Patriarchy,” in Ferguson & Marso, 31.

¹⁸⁷ It is also undoubtedly important to note that Iraq is not safer for women with American presence. In fact, the region has seen an increase in gender-based violence. (See Katrina Lee-Koo)

echoes this foregrounding of men's role as protector, restructuring its narrative in order for the male lead to rescue his wife and daughter, literally defending the homeland with precise military operations.

This cynically deployed feminist rhetoric resonates with the fact that feminism in the 2000s was increasingly embattled, dogged by the belief that "[w]omen's rights were achieved for Americans long ago, so there is no need for feminists to agitate for them at home."¹⁸⁸ At the same time, women's rights, particularly in relation to their reproductive autonomy, are increasingly under attack from both the religious and political right. The focus on conservative gender politics is but one of the complex interactions taking place in 2009 and 2010. Both *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) and *Last House on the Left* (2009) reflect "reactionary gender politics and (the) concurrent reinvigoration of 'family values' rhetoric typifying American culture in the wake of 9/11."¹⁸⁹ In concert with the entrenchment of conservatism and paranoid homeland security policies popular during the George W. Bush years, this period also sees an upswing in the rhetoric of interrogation and torture. It is clear, then, that "the cultural climate of the United States in the early twenty-first century is akin to the social unrest that the country experienced in the 1970s – that, for, example, Iraq is the new Vietnam."¹⁹⁰ This sense of civil unrest in both time periods underscores and informs both the originals and remakes of *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*.

¹⁸⁸ Michael L. Ferguson, "Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-September 11 Bush Administration," in Ferguson & Marso, 210.

¹⁸⁹ Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, "Teenage Traumata," in *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millenium*, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 82.

¹⁹⁰ Andrew Patrick Nelson, "Traumatic Childhood Now Included," in Hantke, 116.

Chapter 3

Introduction

Last House on the Left is, both, an adaptation of a medieval ballad, and a much darker re-imagining of Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*.¹⁹¹ As noted in Chapter 1, the rape-revenge narrative has had many incarnations over time, and this specific story, the rape of a daughter followed by revenge from the family on her behalf, also has been presented many times.¹⁹² This chapter analyzes the rape-revenge film *Last House on the Left*, which was first produced and released in 1972 and then re-made in 2009.

The question of feminism is particularly compelling in the case of *Last House on the Left*, given that the family unit takes revenge on the female protagonist's behalf. The familial revenge further complicates discourses of female vulnerability and independence. Critics claim that, in this case, the female victim is merely a prop necessary to further the rape storyline. If "female self-sufficiency, both physical and mental, is the hallmark of the rape-revenge genre,"¹⁹³ what does this change in storyline mean for readings of *Last House on the Left*? How do these shifting representations complicate the already loaded pairings of victim and femininity, avenger and feminism?

Wes Craven, director of *Last House on the Left* (1972), has claimed that his film is a reaction to the Vietnam War, footage of which was broadcast into living rooms for

¹⁹¹ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 22, 38.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 143.

the first time during the period in which this film was made. But, notably, the film was also made during a time when second wave feminism was at its height, and could be read as existing in tension and dialogue with these broader feminist challenges. These challenges, outlined in Chapter 2, include confrontations between the tenets of feminism, the family, and dominant gender roles. This chapter will explore both iterations of the film *Last House on the Left*. I will first examine the two act structure of each film before drawing out comparisons between the films.

Last House on the Left (1972)

The movie's narrative begins with Mari Collingwood (Sandra Cassel) leaving her home in the country in order to celebrate her 17th birthday by seeing a concert in New York with her friend Phyllis Stone (Lucy Grantham). Before leaving, her parents, John (Gaylord St. James) and Estelle (Cynthia Carr), give Mari a gift (a peace necklace), but also express concern over a number of issues: her clothing, the band, and her friendship with Phyllis. Undaunted by a radio report detailing the crimes of a group of psychopaths, including Krug Stillo (David Hess), his son Junior (Marc Sheffler), his girlfriend Sadie (Jeramie Rain), and his brother Weasel (Fred Lincoln), Mari and Phyllis arrive in the city. Looking for marijuana, they meet Junior on the front stoop of an apartment building. When the girls follow Junior to the apartment, they are quickly trapped and held captive by the group of criminals. Meanwhile, Mari's parents bake a cake in preparation for her surprise party.

After the girls are assaulted in the apartment, they are forced into the trunk of a car and the kidnappers, wanted by the police, attempt to flee the state. However, the car

breaks down in the countryside, right in front of Mari's house just as her parents are reporting Mari missing to the police. After Phyllis is beaten, she initially escapes by running through the woods, but is ultimately caught by the group and killed. Mari is then raped, tortured, and killed. In an attempt to find a phone, the group stumbles across Mari's parent's home. Mari's parents allow them to stay, knowing their daughter is missing but unaware of her fate. When Estelle finds her daughter's necklace, however, she realizes that something is wrong and she and John subsequently find Mari's dead body. Intent on avenging their daughter's death, the parents lay traps for, and kill, each member of the group.

Act One

Last House on the Left begins with a depiction of an idyllic suburban life. As Mari prepares to leave for the concert, her nipples are clearly showing through her shirt, and her father confronts her, asking: "What's with this tit business?" Mari replies that nobody wears bras anymore, forcing her mother (who turns away from her daughter) to state "Nobody [wears bras] except us drill sergeants."¹⁹⁴ This brief scene emphasizes the Collingwood's concern over Mari's sexual and social freedom, but also implies that both have distaste for a certain type of women's liberation, epitomized in the popular media by "bra burning." Bra burning feminists are positioned here as similar to "drill sergeants" who, in the military, are responsible for the training of new recruits; in this case, feminists are understood by Estelle as brainwashing, or otherwise controlling, young women into a certain lifestyle. Mari's father, John, has little patience with feminism,

¹⁹⁴ "Scene 1," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

although this is presented more subtly in the film as a lack of parental control he feels he now has in her choices. Mari's mother attempts to scold her daughter by beginning to tell her about when she was Mari's age, to which Mari flippantly responds that Estelle "used to tie [her breasts] up like little lunatics in straitjackets." In this exchange, there is a clear generational separation between Mari and Estelle, which resonates with broader societal responses to feminism. This scene is important not only because it is the sole sequence where we see Mari interact with her parents, but also because it establishes the tension between "new" feminism (or its effects) and alternative lifestyles and the established "normal" nuclear family. For Estelle and John, feminism and the counterculture (and the perceived consequences) are inextricably linked and together present a force against conservative family values.

The dialogue with Estelle and John show them to be fairly conventional, and the subtext is that they are concerned with the impact of the outside world on their daughter. When asked by Estelle "what's new in the outside world?", John responds jokingly: "Same old stuff – murder and mayhem." The set up is clear here: Mari wants to visit the "outside" world for her birthday, but her parents worry about its effects. John is placated by the fact that Phyllis "comes from that neighborhood," even though Mari further jokingly explains she's from "that slum".¹⁹⁵ While Phyllis' background is never elaborated, her urban background is assumed to be of benefit to the girls as they travel the city. Additionally, this representation of parental concern and conservatism is somewhat moderated when John gives his daughter the gift of a peace necklace and tells her she is a member of the "love generation." This necklace becomes a key element in the storyline,

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

acting as a sort of countercultural talisman that leads her parents to her dead body - although it is unable to protect her, it does lead her parents to the killers.

The family unit is represented as the cornerstone of society in *Last House on the Left* (1972); John and Estelle are shown to be remnants of the 1950s living within a pristine and decidedly suburban world. Mari's independence is positioned as a risk to the family unit, as it is allied with a counterculture seen as dangerous and connected to sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Because she willfully seeks her independence, the film suggests that Mari is vulnerable to the forces of a counterculture gone wrong. This comes in the form of the deviant alternative family lead by Krug, which is working to defile the sanctity of traditional American values.

The film positions Mari as an innocent girl just entering womanhood; she still calls her father "Daddy" and seeks parental permission to go to the concert. Stuck between two points, post-sweet 16 and yet before 18, Mari is a character in the midst of a life transition, yearning for both her own independence and her father's approval at the same time. The scenes of Mari and Phyllis on their way to the concert present them as fun loving girls experiencing their freedom for the first time. The characters equate this freedom with the empowerment they are experiencing as a result of their changing adolescent bodies: Mari proclaims, "Hey, I changed this winter. My breasts filled out."¹⁹⁶ Though Mari links her bodily changes with sexual maturity, the girls are purposefully positioned as sexually naive. When Phyllis asks what Mari thinks it would be like to "make it" with Bloodlust (the name of the band they are going to see), Mari responds "not wild and gory."

¹⁹⁶ "Scene 2," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

The representation of Mari stands in stark contrast to Sadie, the only female member of Krug's criminal gang. Where Mari is portrayed as just entering womanhood, Sadie is portrayed as firmly established in hers. Sadie claims that she is her "own friggin woman." A radio broadcast describing the group refers to her as "young, strong, and animal-like." In contrast to Mari, who is still ensconced with her parents, Sadie is positioned as a radical feminist within her group:

Krug: Hey, what have you been doing? Reading those creep women lib magazines while I was up in the jug?

Sadie: Maybe.

Krug: Why don't you just lay back and enjoy being inferior?

Sadie: Zing off! You male chauvinist dog.

...

Sadie: I ain't putting out any more until I get a couple more chicks around here.

Krug: Couple of more chicks?

Sadie: Yeah. Equal representation.¹⁹⁷

This scene takes place as the girls are on their way to the concert, walking through an urban neighborhood in order to buy marijuana. Sadie is intent on the idea of bringing more females into the group, believing this "equal representation" will make her a leader, or at least less inferior. Sadie espouses feminist ideas, but she is also a sociopath, a rapist, and a murderer – in fact, it is her desire for "equal representation" that is positioned as an integral part in the group's motivation for kidnapping Mari and Phyllis in the narrative. Magazines explicitly arguing for female liberation are marked as "creepy" by Krug, and Sadie utilizes her sexual power by threatening to withhold sex if she does not get the fair treatment she feels she deserves. By making Sadie the only character to articulate overtly feminist discourse, the film represents feminism as dangerous and feminists as

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

murderous. *Last House on the Left* (1972) thus effectively stages the distortion of feminism present in the backlash to the feminist second-wave that is evident in the culture at large.

The film uses cross cutting quite often in the initial sequences, contrasting the safe world inside Mari's family home and the dangers of the outside world. As we see Mari and Phyllis being held hostage in the apartment, parallel scenes of domesticity with Mari's parents are also shown. This type of narrative cross-cutting runs throughout the film, and audience focus is split between the sexual violence perpetrated against Mari and Phyllis and the domestic life of Mari's parents. As the parents enjoy planning Mari's surprise party, Phyllis is threatened. Estelle makes a cake and her husband says "Come into the living room, I want to attack you", while Phyllis is sexually assaulted.¹⁹⁸ The violence continues in the apartment while John and Estelle decorate the living room for Mari's birthday, pitting wholesome domesticity against the violent chaos within the counterculture alternative family. As Mari begs for her life, John pronounces that the "Castle's ready" for the princess, and pronounces his wife the queen. John's boasts here are rendered empty and hollow in comparison to the scenes of Phyllis and Mari's assault. John is unable to protect his daughter, and this ironic juxtaposition serves to underscore John's own reliance on stereotypically normative representations of fatherhood, family, and masculinity.

In *Last House on the Left*, domesticity and the world inside the home is represented as the last bastion of resistance to the extremely violent outside world. It does so by setting two different family types in opposition to one another. Krug's group, the

¹⁹⁸ "Scene 3," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

“alternative” family challenges the Collingwood heteronormative family unit by literally taking something from them. In murdering Mari, they destroy any sense of normalcy; in taking their revenge, the Collingwoods are no longer the picture of idyllic American life, now besieged by the mayhem Krug’s group represents, they become violent themselves. John’s failure to protect his princess daughter collapses the family unit, and he is the first to plan revenge. The family home, once represented as resistant to the outside world, both figuratively and literally, allows it inside. John invites the alternative family unit in and in doing so furthers the normative family unit’s demise.

In this time period, the alternative family unit was often posed as a violent threat to normative families. By 1968, Charles Manson became a symbolic figurehead of this type of threat with his group of followers, referred to as the “Family”. Predominantly composed of youth from the San Francisco bohemian counterculture and predominantly young white women, the Family existed on the fringe of society and was devoted to such subjects as science fiction and the occult.¹⁹⁹ However, Manson also prophesized an oncoming apocalyptic race war, and this violence was expressed in 1969 with a string of murders orchestrated by Manson and carried out by members of the Family. These murders included upper-class Californians, the most famous of which was the pregnant Sharon Tate, actress and wife of Roman Polanski, director of the acclaimed horror film *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968).

The Family became symbolic of the counterculture gone extremely wrong, perverted by the very things counterculture worked against: “war, pain, and evil.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.britannica.com.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca/EBchecked/topic/1245941/Charles-Manson>

²⁰⁰ Gair, *American Counterculture*, 218.

Manson's psychotic perversion of the movement marked the beginning of the end of the counterculture, and the extensive coverage of the Manson murders served to further link the movement with societal violence and disruption. This is nowhere more apparent than in Manson's sociopathic interpretation of a Beatles song, Helter Skelter, which "helped to formulate an ideology that seemed to mark the implosion of the counterculture."²⁰¹ As a result of the Manson Family murders, "countercultural optimism ... largely evaporated" by 1972.²⁰²

This general cynicism and disillusionment was not solely relegated to the counterculture, but also marked American life as a whole at the time. Criticism of the traditional nuclear family, particularly women's role within it, was central to feminist discourse. In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Shulamith Firestone argued from a radical feminist perspective that "oppressive heterosexuality" was society's patriarchal foundation. To counteract this was to "undo the nuclear family" which required the separation of womanhood from the role of wife and/or mother.²⁰³ Also in 1970, the division of labor within the home between husband and wife was a prominent topic.²⁰⁴ In *Last House on the Left* (1972), Mari's parents' relationship reflects the traditional roles of husband and wife that these feminist discourses sought to undo. Estelle is shown baking a cake and taking on the role of decorating the house, with John periodically interrupting to oversee her work or request sex. Further, every woman in the film is represented as submissive to the male characters: Mari and Phyllis are victims of violence, Estelle is

²⁰¹ Ibid., 210, 167.

²⁰² Ibid., 218.

²⁰³ Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 97.

²⁰⁴ See Pat Mainardi's 1970 essay "The Politics of Housework."

shown as inferior to her husband, and even Sadie must fight for a place in a group of men, as her demand to assault Phyllis first is rejected, rendering her passive and lowest in the hierarchy.

Last House on the Left portrays the rape in the film as a drive on the part of the rapists to enhance their criminal reputations. Krug and his group are preoccupied with committing a sex crime, stating outright that they hope to commit a crime on par with the “meanest, foulest, rottenest, raunchiest sex crime.”²⁰⁵ The torture and humiliation preceding the rape is given a large amount of screen time, with the characters shown taunting the girls: “You’ll have plenty of time to feel the pain.”²⁰⁶ Though Phyllis manages to escape – in a long chase sequence – she is ultimately killed in one of the film’s most brutal violent sequences. She is stabbed approximately 10 times, and Sadie is depicted pulling out portions of Phyllis’ intestines. Mari is shown Phyllis’ amputated arm, and then tortured and raped by Krug. Krug’s rape of Mari lasts approximately one minute, and is shot from the side often in close up or extreme close-up. For the most part, the film focuses almost exclusively on the faces of Mari’s attackers, on Mari’s and Krug’s faces pressed together, or on Mari’s hands clutching grass as she is raped. Consequently, Mari’s rape seems to be presented from a relatively objective point of view, with occasional close-ups that force the viewer to focus on her trauma.

In the aftermath of her rape, Mari wanders through the woods to the lake and stands silently before slowly walking into the water and standing waist-deep. Krug shoots Mari three times as she stands in the water, taking careful aim before each shot. This

²⁰⁵ “Scene 4,” *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

marks yet another moment of cross cutting: we see Krug shoot Mari and then we see the family dog reacting to two more gunshots. This brief scene by the lake, prior to her death, is the only point where the film shows the effect of the rapes on Mari.

Roughly twenty-five minutes into the movie, two local policemen are introduced as characters when John and Estelle report their daughter missing. For the next hour, the police are presented as completely ineffectual in the narrative, shown playing checkers and reading magazines on the job. They are made aware of the crimes after a radio report detailing the make and model of the group's car, which they had encountered earlier in the film. After the police car breaks down, the police are shown trying to ride on the roof of a truck carrying chickens, but are thrown off. The film clearly depicts the law as inept in their ability to fight crime. This portrayal of the police serves the narrative function of advancing the story towards familial revenge. However, rather than simply moving the story along, the film makes a particular point of representing the local law enforcement as laughable through slapstick and inappropriate humor (given the seriousness of the subject matter). The switch in tone seems to underscore the lack of institutional support in the broader culture at large in cases of rape or familial violence.

In the early 1970s, a major aspect of the second-wave and anti-rape movements involved working to "fit the rape issue ... in public policy," including "changing the treatment of victims by medical and law enforcement personnel."²⁰⁷ Prior to the anti-rape movement's efforts, police, public figures, and the law in general tended to toward the view that women should expect certain treatment in certain scenarios, and that rape was a fault of the culture at large and women rather than the offender. As late as 1977, a rapist's

²⁰⁷ Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 133.

conviction was reversed after the California court of appeals ruled, “a woman who enters the car of a stranger must expect sexual advances.”²⁰⁸ Also in 1977, a Wisconsin judge ruled that a 15-year-old boy could not be held accountable for raping a woman, as he was simply “reacting normally to relaxed cultural attitudes about sex and the recent fashion of more-revealing clothing for women.”²⁰⁹ Clearly the film is playing off these attitudes in its representations of the law; the only serious moment involving law enforcement in the film occurs at the end, when an officer arrives in time to be splattered with blood as the final act of revenge is committed. The film seems to suggest that blood is literally on everyone’s hands.

Act Two

Following the rapes and murders, the criminal gang finds Mari’s parents house and are treated like guests. Krug, Sadie, and Weasel are clearly uncomfortable in the face of this middle class experience, as Krug states: “Goddamn high-class tight-ass freakos. All that goddamned silverware. Who do they think they are, anyway?”²¹⁰ Meanwhile, Junior, who was not directly involved in any of the violence, and racked with guilt after discovering that they are in Mari’s house, hides in the bathroom with symptoms of drug withdrawal. Estelle discovers Mari’s peace necklace around his neck, and, their suspicions of foul play confirmed, the parents go on to find Mari’s body by the side of the lake. The film represents the parents as immediately deciding to take revenge, though it is important to note the ad hoc nature of the revenge. Each parent performs a different type

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 131.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ “Scene 10,” *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

of revenge, with John shown choosing weapons directly after finding the body. In contrast, Estelle's revenge seems almost accidental; standing in the living room presumably waiting for John, she encounters Weasel and is forced to take care of him herself.

In *The New Avengers*, Jacinda Read categorizes films in which the maternal figure takes her revenge as a "maternal trauma drama."²¹¹ Though Mari's father also takes revenge on her behalf, the key figure in avenging Mari is her mother. As previously noted, one of the most problematic aspects of rape-revenge is the use of sexuality by the rape survivor in order to enact her revenge. In *Last House on the Left* (1972), however, it is Estelle who steps outside her role as caregiver and uses her sexuality to distract Weasel in the living room, convincing him to go outside. Estelle uses Weasel's male ego against him, succeeding in tying his hands behind his back and leading him to the river, where she continues to seduce him. Although Estelle is shown to be seducing Weasel out of necessity, the sequence is filled with comically romantic dialogue, involving Estelle rendering herself a passive conquest for Weasel:

Weasel: I could make love to a looker like you with my hands tied behind my back. Let's go over to the couch.

Estelle: No! John might hear us and come in. Why don't we go outside?

Weasel: Outside?

Estelle: Please. I want you.

Weasel: Let's go outside.

Estelle: I've always dreamed of a man who could take me easily. Almost like you said ... with your hands tied behind your back.

Weasel: Baby, believe me, I can literally do that. I'm so super.

Estelle smiles.

Weasel: Goddamn it. Here. Tie me up.

Estelle: I couldn't! I thought it was just some girlish fantasy. I know no man could do that.

²¹¹ Jacinda Read, *The new avengers: Feminism, femininity and the rape-revenge cycle* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 212.

Weasel: I said, tie me up.
 Estelle: Well ... (*ties him up*)
 Weasel: Now you just unzip me, and that's all I'll need you for.
 Estelle: Okay.
 Weasel: (*Noise of Pain*) You got it caught.
 Estelle: On your little thing! How did I do that? Shall I just give it a little yank?
 Weasel: Don't do that! Just ease it down. Nice and easy. Just like that.
 Estelle: Poor little fellow.
 Weasel: It's not little. You just scared it, that's all. Just wait. If you don't watch it, I'm gonna come.
 Estelle: Please come then, sweetie.
 Weasel: Don't you want me to do you good and proper?
 Estelle: You can do both ... can't you?
 Weasel: Hell yeah! I can come five or six times if you want me to. (Estelle begins to pleasure him) You bitch. I think I'm gonna come.
 Estelle: Are you sure, my love?
 Weasel: Sweet mama! Here I come!²¹²

In this sequence, Estelle is clearly presented as playing on Weasel's desire for power, and her castration of him as he begins to ejaculate literally rids him of what he perceives as his best asset. Weasel is shown to be an egotistical buffoon; he is easily tied up and controlled, and ends up ejaculating prematurely. However, it must be noted that though Estelle steps outside her role as passive wife, she is still acting as a mother; her seductive treatment of Weasel is mitigated by her role as a maternal castrator. In doing so, *Last House on the Left* complicates any reading of feminist discourse(s) by the "coupling of a discourse of rape with a discourse of maternity."²¹³ As Read argues, the "maternal rape-revenge film mobilizes women's issues largely in the service of both patriarchal and right-wing ideologies, particularly those inherent in backlash politics."²¹⁴

²¹² "Scene 13," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

²¹³ Read, *The new avengers*, 212.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Following Read's accurate assessment of the complexities of maternal rape-revenge, determining what is feminist about Estelle's actions in particular is rendered more difficult. Estelle's actions are in service of her husband, in an attempt to save him from Weasel. She puts her own body in the line of fire, allowing her husband to literally weaponize the home in a powerful display of macho tradition that "speaks to a post-68, 'post-feminist' crisis in male identity."²¹⁵ By emasculating Weasel, she empowers John; in doing so, she reinscribes male, parental authority. *Last House on the Left* (1972) characterizes Estelle as almost completely in the service of male pleasure.

Connected to the problematic intersection of these discourses is the issue of marriage. Yet another troubling aspect of this sequence is the way in which it reverberates with an earlier scene between Estelle and John. Estelle eagerly assents to being "attack[ed]" and otherwise manhandled by her husband earlier in the film. Though Estelle speaks of "girlish fantasy" to Weasel, it appears that her husband has already fulfilled the fantasy. Estelle's use of her sexuality in the face of extreme assertions of masculinity²¹⁶ portrays her in two differing ways: with John, as a good woman in the service of her husband; with Weasel, as a knowing and manipulative woman. Both men are represented as sex-starved. Her sequence with Weasel underscores the way in which assumptions about women's traditional roles render men vulnerable to women's manipulations. Her dialogue with Weasel is feminine and submissive, and she utilizes endearments to pacify him; indeed, the rhetoric, if not for the context, would seem like she was speaking to her husband. This sexual power she holds over Weasel in the latter

²¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

²¹⁶ Here I refer to John's rather forceful desire for sex, and Weasel's defense of both the size and ability of his penis.

half of the film, and which culminates in his castration, is difficult to separate from her total (including sexual) submissiveness to her husband. Estelle's sexuality is her power, but this literally operates only outside the home (she removes herself and Weasel from the home before attacking him), reflecting contextual tensions over women's role both inside and outside family life. The position of wife and mother is separate from sexual power, and Estelle embodies this contradiction between "public, masculine space and private, feminine space."²¹⁷ The film attempts to portray the difference(s) between consensual sexual domination and its criminal counterpart; however, regardless of authorial intent, it manages only to conflate the two by ultimately making the female as always object and always objectified.

Estelle's character is further complicated in the sequence in which she takes revenge on Sadie. Sadie and Estelle's fight sequence is interspersed with shots of the final battle between Krug and John. Though a relatively short sequence, the fight between Estelle and Sadie is crucial for a number of reasons. The most important reason is that it depicts violence between two women. In *Last House on the Left*, we see Sadie's interactions with the girls, and the eventual murder of Sadie by Estelle; as we will see in the next chapter, in *I Spit On Your Grave* there is no such female interaction. In this depiction of female on female violence, overt expressions of female sexuality are not represented. Sadie and Estelle spend the majority of their time in a brutal fistfight on the ground. The representation of female fighting is notable because, as Brownmiller argues, "aggressive physical grappling was part of [men's] heritage, not [women's]," yet *Last House on the Left*'s only scene of such action takes place between two women. In doing

²¹⁷ Read, *The new avengers*, 219.

so, *Last House on the Left* represents both Sadie and Estelle as women with some limited power on the basis of their interactions with each other, although both are represented as caught within patriarchally dominated situations. However, while Krug and John's fight sequence is almost 6 minutes long, Sadie is fought and killed within a minute. Male posturing and outrageous displays of masculinity are given more screen time and are rendered more important within the film.

Last House on the Left's portrayal of masculinity and fatherhood is also complex. Sally Robinson's exploration of *Deliverance*, outlined in Chapter 2, offers both a contextual and textual reference point here. Though her argument is centered on a film that depicts male on male rape, much of her analysis is applicable to an understanding of heterosexual rape-revenge because of her discussion of American masculinity in the mid-1970s. The internal and external fight between civility and savagery that is so clearly played out in *Deliverance*, is also seen in both *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*. While *I Spit On Your Grave* perhaps more closely parallels *Deliverance*, as will be explored in Chapter 4, *Last House on the Left* also shows civility under threat when it depicts two stereotypically male characters, a father and a criminal, also a father, engaging in combat for different kinds of control over a girl. The father fights the rapist, civility combating savagery, and both are involved in different kinds of "violent explosions".

This alternative/heteronormative masculine division speaks to a wide range of socio-historical discourses and events including the changing American family, second-wave feminism, and the Vietnam War. *Last House on the Left* (2010), in particular, reflects this divide by positioning an abusive, explosive, sadistic father (Krug) against an

adoring, protective father. The split between the two is evident in the sequences before Mari's rape, where John struggles with the loss of his son as Krug abuses his own. Even with his grief still obviously present, he allows Mari to take the car and drive into town, whereas Krug maintains a sadistic control over his entire family. This portrayal is clearly designed to align us with John; we root for him as he claims his rightful place as the positive role model - a traditional, heteronormative, male father figure.

In the aftermath of Weasel's castration and death, Krug immediately falls victim to a series of traps set by John. John and Krug begin to fight immediately, though the scene is heavy with dialogue, while Sadie and Estelle's fight is silent. Krug taunts John, speaking to and about Mari's dead body as well as calling him a "pussy," and suggesting that Mari was stronger than John is.²¹⁸ Krug not only calls into question John's masculinity, but his role as a father as well; somewhat paradoxically, John must prove his masculinity by avenging Mari and also by demonstrating that he is stronger than his daughter. Roughly halfway through this sequence, Junior, still overwhelmed by guilt, enters the room and attempts to kill Krug with a pistol, but misses. Krug bullies Junior into killing himself, first by calling him a loser and then by ordering him to put the gun in his mouth. Within the normative family home, Junior attempts to take revenge on his alternative father for his own abuse and torment, but, emasculated by his father's rejection (and his failure to participate in the rape) he ultimately fails.

The ease with which both Estelle and especially John descend into violence, however, can also be seen as a response to the realities of the Vietnam War. For the first time, Americans could see daily depictions of war in all its brutality, and the violence of

²¹⁸ "Scene 14," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham (1972; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

regular people like themselves. These daily newsreels desensitized viewers and also made it easier to justify violence in the name of self-defense, and in defense of the home. In short, Americans could rationalize violence as acceptable in certain civilian contexts,. In addition, the ability of governmental institutions to take care of and protect citizens was also in doubt at this time. The social chaos precipitated by the Vietnam War is perhaps nowhere more clear than with the Kent State shootings of 1970, where college students were shot by the Ohio National Guard in response to a non-violent protest about the invasion of Cambodia. Four students were killed and nine injured, exemplifying a disintegrating American society where young Americans were being shot on both foreign and domestic soil. In short, external violence was brought directly into family life by these developments and events; in this way, the film works to emphasize “the *continuity* between its depictions of brutality and the ordinariness of everyday life.”²¹⁹ The disturbing realism of the film is in part due to a documentarian style of filmmaking -*Last House on the Left* (1972) is “filmed with the same gritty, unadorned newsreel style.”²²⁰

The beginning of *Last House on the Left* (1972) shows the stereotypically suburban family lifestyle, where the mother and father decorate for their “princess” to return for a birthday party. The film ends with the destruction of suburban normalcy, the same living room now covered in blood as the parents huddle together at its center, the celebratory birthday banner fallen behind them. Patriarchal dominance is left in tact, however, as Estelle, clutching herself after she has killed Sadie, is brought inside by the police and immediately clutches John, hiding her face behind his. Rather than standing

²¹⁹ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 118.

²²⁰ Ibid.

side by side with her husband, both having committed brutal acts of revenge in the service of their daughter, John is still portrayed as the unquestioned leader and protector. *Last House on the Left* (1972) reflects the challenges to the nuclear family in its refusal to provide a happy ending, representing the struggle between alternative and normative lifestyles as on going – but in both patriarchy remains unchallenged.

Last House on the Left (2009)

Directed by Dennis Iliadis and written by Carl Ellsworth and Adam Alleca, *Last House on the Left*'s 2009 remake diverges in significant ways from the rape-revenge structure mapped out in the original. Rather than beginning in the country and getting captured in the city, Mari Collingwood (Sara Paxton) leaves the city with her parents, Emma (Monica Potter) and doctor John (Tony Goldwyn), for a vacation at the family lake house. It is clear from Emma and John's reactions to pictures and a toy, respectively that the family is grieving the loss of Mari's brother, a character who does not exist in the original film. Soon after arriving, Mari goes into town to visit a friend, Paige (Martha MacIsaac) and they meet Justin (Spencer Treat Clark), whose invitation to return to his hotel room to smoke marijuana leads to their capture. Here the film bears a similarity to the original, as the criminal group kidnaps both girls, puts them into the car, and attempt to leave the state after freeing Krug from the cops for prior crimes. After Mari orchestrates the car crashing near her home, Paige is murdered as Mari is raped. Mari is able to escape through the woods to the lake, but is shot while swimming to safety and gravely injured.

As in the original, the violent gang, Krug, Sadie, Francis and Justin, just happen to seek shelter at the Collingwood lake house, unaware of its connection to Mari. Although unnerved by the group, John and Emma allow them to stay in the guesthouse. Justin, wracked by guilt, confesses the group's connection to Mari, who is eventually discovered on the back porch bleeding heavily and in shock. John, a physician, is able to stabilize Mari, and the effort to find the missing keys to the vehicle needed to transport Mari to safety leads the parents to confront the group. The parents kill each member of the group, with the exception of Justin, who joins them to help to kill Krug. The survivors leave the lake house via boat to transport Mari to the hospital.

Act One

One of the most distinct alterations in the *Last House on the Left* remake is the representation of its female characters. This is most immediately apparent with the character of Sadie. In the opening scenes of the film, the group orchestrates an attack on a police transport carrying a captured Krug, and after killing two cops, Sadie seeks Krug's approval, pleading for him to tell her she "did good."²²¹ The audience's first experience of Sadie, then, is of deranged subservience; this is in stark contrast to her representation as powerful feminist psychopath in the original. In 1972, Sadie is dangerous because she challenges Krug and is positioned within the film as responsible for the girls' capture because of her desire for equality. In this version, she is again positioned as responsible for the girls' capture, but now it is solely due to her desire to get back into Krug's good graces. In 2009, Sadie is merely a pawn.

²²¹ "Scene 1," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Iliadis (2009; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

Similarly, the representation of Mari's character, circumstances and family background are different. After the death of her brother, Mari's grief has clearly forced her to grow up. She is an accomplished swimmer and her relationship with her parents is strong, yet the first sequence of Mari features her submerged in a pool, in a fetal position, as if in a womb. However, she is depicted as striving for her independence when she asks to stay in the guesthouse rather than the main house at the lake. The family history also enriches Emma's character, situating her more firmly in the family unit and bolstering her representation as a good mother. Emma's worry over her daughter is linked to the loss of her son, rather than to a generalized fear of a violent outside world.

The male characters are also represented in ways that differ from the original. Justin is portrayed as resentful and afraid of his father; he is a victim of both mental and physical abuse, and quite a bit younger than his 1972 counterpart, Junior. In the original, Junior is always only a shadow of the patriarchal namesake, whereas Justin is presented as distinct from his father and plays a central role in bringing justice to Mari and the Collingwood family in the remake. His invitation to Mari and Paige to return to the hotel room is depicted as innocent and naïve rather than purposeful. The girls only become hostages when the rest of the group comes back unexpectedly early. This scene of capture is markedly different in a number of ways from the apartment scene in the original film. Again, Sadie is presented as driven by lust for Krug's approval, rather than for more power. Whereas in the original Phyllis, portrayed as more experienced in the world, is the more rational of the two kidnapped girls, in the remake Paige is an hysterical counterpart to Mari's quiet strength. Whereas Paige attempts to escape, screaming, through the back window, Mari pleads with Justin and Krug to let them go. Mari's pleas continue as they

are loaded into the car to leave the state; their presence in the car as opposed to being relegated to the trunk marks yet another difference from *Last House on the Left* (1972).

As explored earlier in this chapter, the original film depicts the group stumbling across Mari's parents house as sheer bad luck. But in the remake, Mari controls where the car goes, first by lying about where the highway is in order to deliberately lure them closer to the house, and then by causing the car crash that gives the girls a chance to escape. Mari is quickly subdued, but Paige is able to escape into the woods, mirroring the chase sequence from the original. Eventually she is captured and her death occurs in concert with Mari's rape rather than immediately prior to it, as happens in the original. Paige's death and Mari's rape are directly linked in this version of the film, where both girls stare at each other as Paige slowly bleeds out and Krug eventually reaches his climax in Mari after Paige's death. The consequence of this sequence is a literal pairing together of rape and death in a more explicit way than in the original film. Mari is forced to confront her own trauma as well as the death of Paige at the exact same moment.

Another significant difference between the 1972 and 2009 versions of *Last House on the Left* is the principle around which the rape is organized. The leader of the group – in this case, Krug – is intent on forcing Justin to lose his virginity.²²² The rape sequence begins with Krug asking whether Justin “is ready to be a man.”²²³ The film depicts a clear link between masculinity and the loss of virginity; the latter must be lost to confirm the former. Krug forces his son to touch Mari's breasts and Justin's hesitance angers him. Paige's questions about Krug's masculinity results in her being stabbed: twice in the

²²² A similar theme appears in *I Spit On Your Grave*, explored in the next chapter.

²²³ “Scene 4,” *Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Iliadis (2009; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

stomach by Krug, and once in the back by Francis – a grim sequence made even grimmer by the way in which it evokes a violent sexual double penetration.

It is notable that nearly all of Krug's violent actions within the first half of the film come about when his masculinity is questioned. He is the driving force behind the rapes for two purposes: to make his son a man, and to make himself more of a man in the process. The representation of Mari's rape in *Last House on the Left* (2009) is similar to the original film, particularly in the use of close-ups of Mari screaming, her hand clenching grass, Krug's face as he rapes her, or his hand pressing her face farther into the ground. The close-ups of both faces again force the viewer to confront trauma as a result of sexualized violence. Having already rendered her submissive to him, Krug further exercises his domination, shoving Mari's face into the dirt, and forcing her to stare at Paige as she dies. The brutality of this scene suggests that the filmmakers wish to drive home the reality of rape as an issue of power and control as opposed to purely a quest for sexual pleasure.

Both pre- and post-rape, Mari is portrayed as an intelligent fighter. Smart and calculating, she escapes in the aftermath of her rape by hitting Krug in the face and fleeing to the lake, where she attempts to swim to safety. She is shot while swimming away and, although the audience is not aware of this until several minutes later, survives. During the hiatus caused by her presumed death, the perspective immediately switches to that of her parents, who unwittingly take in their daughter's attackers.

Unlike the original, *Last House on the Left* (2009) does not use the crosscutting technique between the capture and rape and the portrait of the happy family. In part this is because the families between the original and remake are starkly different from the

outset, with the 2009 version already haunted by the loss of their son. Rather than two parents happily decorating a cake, Emma and John worry for their daughter, already familiar with the dangers of the outside world to their nuclear family. *Last House on the Left* (1972) makes the connection between the violence of Mari's assault and the suburban lifestyle explicit; arguably the film is about the consequences of the insularity of a suburban life. Crosscutting is an effective technique in making the differences between the two as clear as possible, while also highlighting disturbing similarities. Both families are represented as dangerous, and both have the potential to destroy the other. *Last House on the Left* (2009), however, is a film that delineates clear boundaries between the alternative and normative family, where there are no similarities between the two and the victory of the latter is never in question.

Act Two

With their car totaled, and believing Mari to be dead, the group searches for a safe place to stay until the morning when they can leave the state. As a thunderstorm rages, the group arrives at the Collingwood home just as John and Emma finish dinner. Unlike the utopian shelter, complete with a candlelit dinner party, represented in the original, Mari's parents are represented as being practical in the face of an emergency. John takes care of the group's injuries from the car crash, while Emma converses with Krug, immediately sensing something is wrong because of his terse treatment of Justin. Ultimately she is soothed by a fake family story invented by Krug because it reminds her

of her lost son and states: “You’re all safe. You’re together. That’s what counts.”²²⁴ This scene underlines the larger point the film is making regarding the importance of the family as a site of safety and healing. Mari’s actions -- misleading the kidnappers, forcing the car crash and swimming to the lake house -- evoke both a literal and figurative return to the family. Safety is depicted as located inside the family home and specifically inside the heteronormative family unit. However, Mari’s return to the family complicates the film as a horror film, creating a ‘final girl’ scenario that is never fully actualized.²²⁵ Instead, argues Heller-Nicholas, the film degenerates into “traditional views of rape as a property crime dispute between men ... as much about the son as it is the raped daughter.”²²⁶

Faced with a dead phone line, a thunderstorm, and no car for either family, John arranges for the group to stay in the guesthouse until morning. Justin, who has seen a picture of Mari on the refrigerator, begins to unravel from guilt, and is admonished by Krug “not to fuck up again.”²²⁷ Faced with his father once again laying responsibility for the sequence of events on him, Justin chooses to drape Mari’s necklace around his cup in the kitchen for Emma to find. This is strikingly different from the original film, in which Estelle sees the necklace on Junior while he is hallucinating from drug withdrawal in the bathroom. In contrast to the earlier version of his character, Justin is represented as an active participant in the killing of *his* family and the preservation of Mari’s family, rather than simply as a bystander.

²²⁴ “Scene 1,” *Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Iliadis (2009; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

²²⁵ Read, *The new avengers*, 92.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

²²⁷ “Scene 1,” *Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Iliadis (2009; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

After taking the group to the guesthouse, John and Emma find Mari on the back porch, apparently not breathing. John quickly performs CPR, stops the bullet wound from bleeding, and begins to inspect the rest of her body for further injuries. When he realizes Mari has also been raped, John begins to cry, but quickly refocuses on Mari's inability to breathe. Emma re-enters the scene having discovered the necklace, watches as John effectively performs lifesaving emergency surgery, all the while whispering endearments to his daughter. John, faced with the news that Mari's necklace and her attackers have been found, explains the extent of her daughter's injuries to Emma:

Emma: The kid. That kid put it there. John, Mari was wearing this when she left. She was wearing this when she left today.

John: (looks towards guest house, crying) Fuck. Em. Em, she was raped.

Emma: (crying) No. No. No!

John: There's blood ... I'm so sorry. Motherfuckers!

Emma: (sobbing) John, John, I should've seen it. I should have realized. He was just standing there looking at her. He looked like a goddamn ghost, he just was staring at her picture on the fridge. Fucking knew it!

John: We are going to get her to a hospital, okay? We are going to do this.

Emma: They're still here. What if they come over here ...

John: You're right. I know. I know. You're right. Which means we gotta be ready. For anything. We have to be ready to do anything. You hear me?

Emma: (nodding) Yeah.²²⁸

A hallmark of the original is the ease and immediacy of the transition into revenge on the part of Estelle and John. John instantly begins choosing weapons and setting traps, as Estelle entraps Weasel. In the remake, with the recognition of Mari's rape, we see a stark departure from the original, as the narrative of the second-half of the film is driven by the push to get Mari to safety. John must give a pep talk to Emma, asserting that they need to be ready "to do anything." John is represented as the unquestioned leader with scruples,

²²⁸ "Scene 1," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Iliadis (2009; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

Emma the sympathetic mother, and Mari the child who needs saving. Indeed, Mari's survival complicates the revenge; because she is alive, the parents' focus moves between avenging her rapists and making sure that she, and they, stay safe. They must find the keys to a boat to take her to the hospital, which leads them to the guesthouse, and ultimately to their revenge.

There is a substantial difference in how revenge is represented in this remake of *Last House on the Left*. John and Emma do not set traps, nor do they actively seek weapons, but, rather, they use what they find around them. John and Emma are represented as engaging in the violence together. This has significant consequences for the portrayal of Emma, who is rendered a weaker character in comparison to both her husband and her 1972 counterpart, Estelle. Emma not only needs to be led, but also needs to be saved. She flirts with Francis initially in order to distract him from Mari on the couch, but she is forced to hurt him when he discovers Mari. Though both John and Emma participate in holding Francis down in order to feed him into the garbage disposal, it is ultimately John who kills Francis and then leads Emma into the guest house. Sadie is shot and killed by Emma, but only after John and Justin have weakened Sadie in a fight. Where John is portrayed as intent and determined, Emma is traumatized; she nearly vomits after Francis' death, and is visibly shaking after shooting Sadie. Emma is given little to do other than care for Mari and step in at the right moment when John has done the hard labor. This is in direct contrast to Estelle, who has at least one opportunity to grow out of subservience in her killing of Weasel and Sadie respectively. The division of labor in the Collingwood's revenge in 2009 serves only to reinforce traditional gender roles within the family.

Similar to the original, Krug's death is the most involved sequence. John and Krug engage in a vicious fight and just as it seems Krug is going to win, Justin appears with a gun. Similarities to the original end here, however. Krug attempts to cajole his son not do anything stupid. When Justin attempts to shoot his father, he finds the gun unloaded, and his attempt at murder sends Krug into an insane rage: "I loved you! I took care of you!"²²⁹ As Justin asks how his father could possibly love him, Krug stabs him with a fire poker, but Justin is saved by Emma wielding a fire extinguisher. This is the sole moment in the remake where Emma takes action that is not directly orchestrated by John, avenging her daughter and acting to save her "replacement" son. John and Emma then simultaneously beat Krug into unconsciousness, trading blows with the fire poker and fire extinguisher, respectively.

Last House on the Left (2009) has a less gritty aesthetic than its predecessor for two reasons. As Heller-Nicholas notes, the film is both "'genrefied' as much as gentrified by its high budget and slick production values."²³⁰ In terms of genre, Heller-Nicholas argues that the film is much more of a horror film than its counterpart, which "suggest[s] it is responding more to current genre conventions than it is seeking any particular political statement."²³¹ The use of horror genre conventions, like thunderstorms and slow, lingering shots, do the work of creating tension, in place of actual narrative content. The film's horror film quality positions Mari's rape as just one small part of the overall narrative. Additionally, the higher production values also result in an unrealistic

²²⁹ "Scene 1," *Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Iliadis (2009; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

²³⁰ Read, *The new avengers*, 92.

²³¹ Ibid.

“Hollywood” ending, subverting any possible political reading about the family, women or the cost of rape in general.

Where *Last House on the Left* (1972) ends with the parents visibly distraught by the loss of their daughter and their now shattered lives, *Last House on the Left* (2009) ends with an unrealistic death for Krug. Despite the need to get Mari to a hospital, John takes the time to paralyze Krug from the neck down, cut him up, and place his head in a microwave. Krug’s head then explodes. This act subverts the positive emotional impact of the boat containing the reborn family, instead leaving a comical final image of violence, rather than a powerful display of familial loss. This abrupt, violent moment is again a horror genre convention, wherein the film provides a final moment of shock and violence to hopefully satisfy viewers; the ending runs in direct contrast to the much darker and gritty *Last House on the Left* (1972).

As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes in her discussion of the original film: “Craven’s rejection of a happily-ever-after universe is an ethical statement in its own right ... in this world, revenge is futile, and can only be rewarded with chaos and despair.”²³² In the late twentieth-century and into the twenty-first, conceptions of the American family have drastically changed. The traditional family is now embattled by “nontraditional familial arrangements, including single parents, blended and stepfamilies, gay and lesbian families, multigenerational and extended families, among others.”²³³ Despite this, the more traditional notion of the American family has a “continuing presence as a vital social institution.”²³⁴ This presence is a powerful force, acting as both

²³² Ibid., 38.

²³³ Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 40.

²³⁴ Ibid.

as a powerful symbol to which all Americans “should” aspire, as well as serving as the norm for institutions and public policy.²³⁵ Although the first half of the film depicts the female lead character’s rape, the latter half of the film is solely devoted to the reconstruction of the family and the protection of the home. In doing so, the film reinforces traditional gender roles and the heteronormative, nuclear family by enacting a literal form of ‘homeland’ security. John’s rhetoric to Emma when motivating her to save their daughter reverberates with the counter-terrorism rhetoric post-9/11: “Which means we gotta be ready. For anything. We have to be ready to do anything. You hear me?”

The “institutional invalidation” of nontraditional families occurs in the representation of Justin, who is shown as having to rise above his damaged past in a broken home. The decision to include Justin on the boat is not shown in the film, but it has profound impact on the film as a whole. Though a relatively minor character in the original, Justin in the remake has become the driving force of the narrative itself: he invites the girls back, he rejects his father by not raping Mari, he gives the Collingwoods Mari’s necklace, he gives the Collingwoods Krug’s gun, he stops his father from killing Mari’s father. Portrayed as a victim of Krug, Justin is the replacement son in desperate need of saving. In giving him a place on the boat, John reconstructs his own nuclear family by replacing his dead son with a rehabilitated Justin. In rescuing both Mari and Justin, the 2009 version re-enacts the clash of a negative and positive father with far more satisfactory results.

²³⁵ Ibid., 46.

Conclusion

Last House on the Left (1972) is, in the most general of terms, a film representing the danger of the “radical” left. In comparison to the heteronormative nuclear family, alternative lifestyles and beliefs in the narrative signal a profound danger to the future of America, as represented by its children. These particular dangers include the counterculture and the breakdown of societal norms, masculinity in crisis due to the Vietnam War, and the burgeoning second-wave feminist movement as posing a threat to the home. These interrelated subjects are key to the narrative of *Last House on the Left*, which utilizes tensions ostensibly precipitated by these things as, not only the context for, but also directly leading to rape, murder, and revenge.

Alternative vs. normative family models are pitted against each other – but both are ultimately figured as untenable. The alternative family, Krug’s demented and somewhat ragtag group of psychopaths, is represented as what a bad upbringing with a deviant father figure looks like. Nonetheless, the father’s control remains central to the family unit. Krug’s domination of his son, Junior, leads him to rebel and commit suicide; however, John’s control of Mari leads to her own form of rebellion, which provides the narrative the film depends on. Despite this, it is the comparatively positive father figure that ultimately wins. By the end of *Last House on the Left*, the story becomes not just a clash of family units but also, more strikingly, a clash of fathers. The battle for fatherhood, for masculinity, as central to the nuclear family is being fought over, both in the world at large at the time and in *Last House on the Left* (1972).

Last House on the Left portrays patriarchal cultural norms wherein men are figured as both threats and as avengers/protectors. Mari, in particular, is the property

circulated between men, facilitating their relationships. In both films, Mari's rape is overshadowed by the revenge sequences, particularly that of her mother. Estelle, already established as John's object earlier in the film, is also circulated between men – at least until the murder of Sadie, which is arguably her only independent action in the entire film. Many of the problematic issues around the use of female sexuality in rape-revenge are displaced onto the mother here; the message is clear that in order for a woman to gain power over a man, she must seduce him and then castrate him. Perhaps more problematic is the character of Sadie, who is presented as a sociopathic second-wave pro-sex feminist in the original. In contrast, Mari is naïve and virginal and Estelle is the aging, subservient housewife who will do what it takes to avenge her daughter. In the end, the complication of maternal, paternal, and rape discourses “insert[s] ... family values into the rape-revenge cycle” and in showing a stereotypically gendered division of labour, complicates and possible feminist subtext.²³⁶

Last House on the Left (1972) is full of contradictions; its representations of its female characters depict them as ultimately controlled by men and any attempt at equality only occurs as violence or sex on specifically phallic terms. The film simultaneously argues for a return to the home and the normative family unit while also representing it as embattled. However, despite its many limitations, it is a powerful film reflecting an ideologically confused time period, and is symptomatic of “political demonology’s tortured oppositions: [female/male], right/left, old/young, pro-war/antiwar, bourgeois culture/counterculture, [and] middle class/working class.”²³⁷

²³⁶ Read, *The new avengers*, 217.

²³⁷ Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 143.

The chaos of an ideologically confused time period is seen in the original film. While the film itself is cleanly split between rape/murder and revenge, both are characteristic of a rapidly changing social context, where gender and social roles are increasingly insecure. The oppositions Lowenstein identifies as occurring in society at large in the early 1970s are clearly reflected in this narrative strife within the family is compounded by the external, alternative forces in the early 1970s; in the end, it can be argued that films like *Last House on the Left* both reflected and reproduced these clashes.

In keeping with an already established chaotic tone, the ending of *Last House on the Left* (as already noted) is an unhappy one. Though the “good” father has effectively won, the family appears forever fractured because of its encounters with an alternative lifestyle. John and Estelle, covered in blood and clutching one another, are horrified on two fronts: the loss of their only child (whose innocence is also stolen), and what they have done to avenge her. In defending the homefront, the Collingwoods bring violence directly into their living room – much like violent footage of the Vietnam War entering homes for the first time. The lasting image of *Last House on the Left* (1972) is one of a family in trauma – a hyperbolic representation of a nation in trauma - where war cannot be won, merely endured. In contrast, *Last House on the Left* (2009) is more narratively pleasing because it concludes on an upbeat note with a clichéd Hollywood ending. If *Last House on the Left* (1972) is a picture representing the harsh realities of war, violence and social uncertainty, *Last House on the Left* (2009) is about good triumphing over evil in a post-9/11 and Iraq War world.

Similar to the rise of the New Right in the 1980s, and their embrace of a traditional family with a father as the figurehead, contemporary politics has seen a

resurgence in discourses centered around the heteronormative family unit. The introduction of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996, which remains a point of debate for American politics, the radical right's championing of the nuclear family as its central motif and message is still very much on the agenda. This perspective maintains the father, in particular, as the economic as well as social power within the community. This pro-family perspective coincides with the backlash against feminism in the 1990s. Reflecting these contextual tensions, and similar to the original film, *Last House on the Left* (2009) pits alternative and normal families against each other. What differs, however, is the way in which these films explore and express this tension. *Last House on the Left* (1972) portrays the ways in which the confluence of counterculture, violence, and bourgeois culture affect and destroy *each other*; *Last House on the Left* (2009) shows the ways in which the upper class nuclear family destroys anything in its path in order to win and restore normalcy. Thus, the positive father, who has been wounded by the loss of a son, is shown reclaiming his power by adopting the abused son of his daughter's sadistic rapist as his own. In doing so, the family, and thus the man, is whole – and Right – again.

Last House on the Left (2009) is best described as a neoconservative film, in which the reconstruction of the family is key to healing fractured masculinity and by extension, a fractured nation. It reflects the American conservative ideal. John's dialogue about "readiness" and the need for a willingness to be "ready to do anything" mirrors conservative rhetoric by the Bush presidency in justification of numerous actions, presented as preventive measures against terrorism. As noted in Chapter 2, post-9/11 films differ from post-traumatic Vietnam cinema by representing masculinity as heroic

and necessary to success. Masculinity is intimately tied to traditional family values, and both are key in fighting domestic and international threats. The center of the film is the heteronormative family unit. Although the Collingwood family has lost a son, they successfully protect their daughter and gain a new son in Justin at the end of the film. So, where *Last House on the Left* (1972) is about the dismantling of the family unit, *Last House on the Left* (2009) is the story of its rebirth.

Chapter 4

Introduction

As noted in Chapter 1, the narrative structure of a rape-revenge film consists of a rape, followed by the woman who was raped taking her revenge. Written and directed by Meir Zarchi, *I Spit On Your Grave* tells the story of Jennifer a young woman from New York City who leaves the city in order to work on her first novel. She arrives and settles into her riverside cabin in the woods and is gang raped by four men days later. Left for dead, she heals and subsequently takes her revenge, systematically killing the men who raped her.

I Spit On Your Grave challenges viewers on both an intellectual and visceral level; its 30-minute long sequence of sexual violence and the intricacies and violence of the protagonist's revenge demands that viewers engage in a careful reflection of the film's political and cultural implications. In this chapter I conduct an analysis of both the original and the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave*, paying close attention to similarities and differences between the films. This analysis will reveal the ways in which the original film was "created in a very different cultural climate" from the remake, and the remake reflects this difference clearly.²³⁸ Each section of analysis will be divided into two distinct acts, reflecting the genre's structure (rape and revenge). The analysis will also consider the way in which the original and the remake represent the protagonist's healing process.

²³⁸ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 179.

I Spit On Your Grave (1978)

The film begins with Jennifer (Camille Keaton) leaving New York City for a rental house in the country in order to work on her book for the summer. Stopping for gas, she is immediately harassed by a group of men – the gas station attendant Johnny (Eron Tabor) and two others, Stanley (Anthony Nichols) and Andy (Gunter Kleemann). Jennifer, not particularly bothered by the events at the gas station, arrives at her cabin and is delivered groceries by another member of the group, Matthew (Richard Pace), who is mentally challenged. The group continues to harass Jennifer, with Stanley and Andy riding by her house in a boat, and the film implies their presence around the cabin at night. A day later, while napping in a canoe, Jennifer is towed to shore by force by Stanley and Andy. On shore, she is raped by all four men. The primary reason for the rape is to rid Matthew of his virginity, though he is initially unwilling to do so and later unable to complete the sex act. In the aftermath of Jennifer's rape, Johnny forces Matthew to return to the cabin and kill her, but Matthew is unable to do so and he leaves her for dead in the cabin.

After a short montage sequence, which depicts Jennifer healing from her injuries, the film focuses on her efforts to take revenge on her attackers. Jennifer stalks Johnny but ultimately makes Matthew her first target, luring him to her cabin. After tricking him into having sex with her, Jennifer hangs him from a tree. Shortly afterwards Jennifer does the same to Johnny, luring him into the woods where she was raped, and then bringing him back to the cabin to castrate and kill him. When Stanley and Andy arrive at the cabin to check on their missing counterparts, Jennifer kills them both. The film ends with Jennifer riding in a boat into the sunset.

Act One

Jennifer, the main protagonist of *I Spit On Your Grave*, is initially depicted as a confident, independent woman. She is shown to be upper class, secure in herself and her position in life and apparently undisturbed by the jeers and flirtation of the gas attendant, Johnny. When asked about herself, she offers information freely, apparently emboldened by the seeming safety of the countryside. Jennifer is depicted as relaxed and comfortable with her status and does not notice or pay attention to the status of others. This opening scene highlights several important binaries explored by the film, including man/woman, city/country²³⁹, and upper/working class. Jennifer is represented as a privileged woman from a nice neighborhood in the big city. This is marked out visually, as she is first seen in expensive outfit, and narratively, as it is made clear that she has the financial stability to take a summer to write her first novel.

The thematic tension between city and country initially introduced in her encounter at the gas station is more explicitly developed in Jennifer's encounter with a second member of the group of men who later attack her. Matthew, a mentally challenged delivery boy, asks her where she is from. When she answers that she is from New York City, the two have a short exchange about the city's "evil" nature, with Jennifer humorously calling herself "an evil New Yorker."²⁴⁰ The conversation quickly takes on a sexual tone. Jennifer is dressed revealingly in short shorts and a midriff/cleavage-baring top and, after giving him a dollar tip, Matthew shouts, "I never got a tip like that

²³⁹ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 115.

²⁴⁰ "Scene 2," *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

before!”²⁴¹ Obviously Matthew is reacting to her body and the audience is also invited to read the double meaning here.

When Matthew asks if she has a boyfriend, Jennifer responds that she has “many boyfriends”; this line is important as it will be reiterated by the men who rape her later in the film.²⁴² It ostensibly provides Jennifer’s attackers with proof that she fits the highly sexualized New York stereotype. Though it is made clear to the audience that Jennifer is responding playfully to Matthew, her attackers are depicted as seeing her as privileged promiscuous and a sexual tease. While clearly positioning Jennifer as wealthy (at least compared to her rapists), the film itself does not represent her as promiscuous in the slightest; the only references to her past sexual behavior is the joking “boyfriends” line discussed above, or conjectural comments made by Johnny and his group.

While popular media and institutional narratives in 1978 vacillated on the question of “blame”, and rape victims were often positioned as not actually unwilling, or ‘asking for it’ for it by dressing provocatively²⁴³²⁴⁴, in this case, the film itself does not overtly position Jennifer as in any way ‘deserving’ rape. In fact, it could be argued that the film is tacitly criticizing the dominant view that Jennifer is inciting or provoking the rapists. In the days before she is attacked, Jennifer is shown as an independent female on vacation; she wears a bikini near the river, and shorts on her own property. She is shown skinny dipping, but the camera pans outwards for an extremely long shot and does not linger on her naked form. So, although Jennifer is depicted as sexual and in control of her

²⁴¹ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 115.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 60.

²⁴⁴ Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 122.

life, all commentary on her clothing, body or sexuality comes from the leering perspective of her rapists. Still, Jennifer's obvious privilege further complicates the sequences leading up to her rape. For Jennifer, the country is merely an escape as her upper class privilege allows her the freedom to transcend her own normal space(s). In contrast to Jennifer's single woman *powerful* urbanity, her rapists are portrayed as socially and economically stuck.

I Spit On Your Grave firmly places the blame for Jennifer's rape on her rapists. It makes explicit that a woman is raped because of rapists, not because she somehow asked for it. Audiences are not intended to identify with these attackers, but, rather, with Jennifer. All four men are represented negatively as uneducated, threatening, and violent. *I Spit On Your Grave*, then, deals with a woman taking justice into her own hands, rejecting "[c]ulturally imposed notions of passivity and frailty [which] promote the kind of submissiveness that puts [women] at risk of being attacked."²⁴⁵ This stands in stark contrast to the original *Last House on the Left* (1972), in which Mari is a symbol of passivity and frailty, a child whose innocence is taken and who needs her family to protect her. In *I Spit On Your Grave*, produced in 1978, Jennifer is Mari all grown up and taking care of herself – arguably a symbol of the advances of second wave feminism.

In *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover uses the binary of city/country as the foundation of her analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*. She argues that it is "an almost crystalline example of the double-axis revenge plot so popular in modern horror: the revenge of the woman on her rapist, and the revenge of the city on the country."²⁴⁶ From this starting point, her analysis evolves into a discussion of the complicated politics of

²⁴⁵ Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 61.

²⁴⁶ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 115.

male hierarchy, other broad social categories²⁴⁷, and the class system. In short, the city/country binary functions metaphorically; the real problem is that the city, in this case represented by Jennifer, is inextricably linked with money, the upper classes, and power. In contrast, the rapists represent the poor, working class disempowered country folks. Johnny, the clear leader of the group, manages the gas station, Stanley and Andy are unemployed, and Matthew works at the grocery store. It is also clear that they are uneducated, or “so we judge from their bad grammar.”²⁴⁸

The behaviour of the group, and the hierarchy between members is made clear in a fishing sequence, where the four men joke with each other and outline, perhaps unwittingly, their motivations for attacking Jennifer, the focal point of their rage:

Matthew: Miss Hills. Miss Hills is special.

Stanley: Who in the fuck is he talking – Miss Hills?

Johnny: He means that broad from New York.

Stanley: Aw, he got a peek at her tits and already she’s special.

Matthew: She’s special. She also gave me a dollar for a tip.

Johnny: New York broads are all loaded, Matthew.

Stanley: Yeah, they fuck around a lot. One day I’m going to go to New York and fuck all the broads there.

Andy: I’m going to do the same in California.

Johnny: Why California?

Andy: Sunset Strip is just swarming with chicks looking to get laid.

Stanley: He wants to go to Hollywood and become another movie star. Another Robert Redford.

Johnny: There’s only one Robert Redford.

Andy: Did I say I wanna be Robert Redford?

Stanley: Hey, Greenwich Village is where you want to go, man. I mean, girls come from all over the country and they go to the Village for one reason. And that’s to get laid.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Other binaries include man/woman, masculine/feminine, and middle/upper class.

²⁴⁸ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 121.

²⁴⁹ “Scene 3,” *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

Although Jennifer is initially the focus, the conversation soon becomes a more general indictment of the availability of urban women for sex. Jennifer, as the “evil New Yorker,” is merely a perverse confirmation of their perspective that New York equals money and sex. While Clover notes that “at this point, the city/country axis yields to gender issues”²⁵⁰, this is not entirely correct; from their description of New York women as “broad” to their opinion that women go to New York purely for sexual reasons, city, gender, money and power are all inextricably linked together in this sequence. Eventually, these themes are tied to sex and violence in the film.

However, Clover is correct in her argument that the rape in the film has less to do with Jennifer’s gender than it does the gender of her rapists. *I Spit On Your Grave* and its presentation of gang rape, she argues, “has first and foremost to do with male sport and male pecking order and only secondarily to do with sex.”²⁵¹ To be sure, the organizing narrative principle for the rapes is the character Matthew. The rape is produced *for* him, both to rid him of his virginity and to disprove his homosexuality.²⁵² The rape begins in order to deflower Matthew, continues for the same purpose, and only ends once it becomes clear Matthew has failed.²⁵³ The rape is depicted as serving a purpose other than sexual pleasure or power/domination over Jennifer; rather, it works to “test and confirm an existing hierarchy.”²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 121.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁵² Within this particular group dynamic, not having sex with a woman is automatically connected to being a homosexual.

²⁵³ Failing, here, meaning that Matthew is unable to come inside Jennifer because the group is “interrupting [his] concentration.”

²⁵⁴ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 122.

Peter Lehman arrives at a similar conclusion in his discussion of rape-revenge in his article “Don’t Blame This On A Girl”, in which he claims “the gang rape structure...points to male homoerotic bonding.”²⁵⁵ In *I Spit On Your Grave*, Johnny’s character is shown abusing his friends, but then healing any insults or violence with endearments and homoerotic touching. In order to have Matthew kill Jennifer, Johnny is soft and entreating, going so far as to promise that “next time” Matthew will be able to ejaculate.²⁵⁶ He physically guides Matthew back towards the house. Similarly, in the aftermath of the attack, the attackers gather together in a diner to discuss their surprise that Jennifer has yet to be found. When Stanley talks too loudly, Johnny is quick to slap him, but even quicker to soothe him. Though Lehman’s argument is problematic in that it ignores female spectatorship of rape-revenge films, Lehman makes an important point that the gang rape structure is homoerotic because of the narrative function the rape victim serves: “The friends ‘share’ the woman in a manner which unites them ... Thus, [the attackers] go directly from the quintessential male tradition of being together in nature without women to raping a woman. Both activities share a common bonding.”²⁵⁷ *I Spit On Your Grave* also represents a kind of masculinity in crisis, in need of constant confirmation and re-confirmation by other male peers.

In the film, the negotiation of masculinity happens via a rape. Jennifer is psychologically and sexually abused over the course of two days. On the first day, the group stalks her as she writes in a hammock and taunts her as she attempts to sleep. The

²⁵⁵ Peter Lehman, “Don’t Blame This On A Girl,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Cohen and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107.

²⁵⁶ “Scene 7,” *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

²⁵⁷ Lehman, “Don’t Blame This On A Girl,” 108.

next day, while relaxing in a canoe, the men drag her canoe with their boat to a dense wooded area. There are three instances of sexual violence depicted, which culminate in penetrative rape, and an additional instance of sexual violence perpetrated by Stanley, where he forces a liquor bottle into her vagina and unsuccessfully attempts to force her to perform oral sex on him while she is unconscious. The entire sequence lasts 34 minutes, with 3.5 minutes comprising actual scenes of sexual assault or rape. In the course of the attack, Jennifer is vaginally penetrated twice (once without ejaculation), anally penetrated once, vaginally penetrated by an object once, and, while unconscious, is forced to perform oral sex, though she is unable to do so.

Not surprisingly, *I Spit On Your Grave* has been criticized for eroticizing Jennifer's rape by showing it in such an extended, graphic fashion. Most famously, Roger Ebert called the film a "vile bag of garbage", aimed purely for those eager to be "entertained by the sight of sadism and suffering."²⁵⁸ This criticism of the film fails to consider that the rapes are not at all eroticized; rather, Meir Zarchi (director) and Yuri Haviv (cinematographer) very carefully render the sequence extremely difficult to watch, favoring Jennifer's point of view, and, when not aligned with her perspective, chiefly employing wide shots. Lehman notes that *I Spit On Your Grave* is "free of conventional ways of eroticizing such scenes," including lighting and close-ups of body parts.²⁵⁹ Any close-ups provided are of faces, either of Jennifer in pain and experiencing trauma, or unattractive ones of the men as they rape her, and are clearly designed to force the viewer to encounter and witness violence in action.

²⁵⁸ Roger Ebert, "I Spit On Your Grave," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 16, 1980, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19800716/REVIEWS/7160301/1023>.

²⁵⁹ Lehman, "Don't Blame This on a Girl," 104.

In the nearly 30 minutes of the sequence that does not include scenes of rape, the camera follows Jennifer as she either fights her attackers or walks through the woods naked. During these sequences, the focus is chiefly on her feet and legs as she walks (which allows the audience to experience her point of view) or on establishing shots which shows her struggling through vegetation. These “in-between” scenes represent Jennifer in shock, and, in keeping with her perspective, the film moves very slowly in these moments, while the rape scenes are comparatively quick. Though this does not remove the possibility for titillation, the sequences themselves are clearly not designed for erotic purposes; rather, they show a sequence of rape from victim’s point of view that is disturbingly realistic. The length of the sequence and the way it is shot work to align the spectator with Jennifer’s experience and help to provide justification for the revenge Jennifer later takes on her rapists.²⁶⁰

As already noted, *I Spit On Your Grave* works hard to dispel any notion that Jennifer has done something to deserve what happens to her. Indeed, Jennifer is shown as a fighter even before she takes her revenge. When the group first takes her canoe to a secluded wooded area, she attempts to fight all four of them off with an oar, then runs, and is only subdued when three men hold her down. During the second instance of rape, the men have to hold her down again as she fights them off. Once back in the cabin, there is a fight sequence where she bites, kicks, and punches Stanley, leading to a brutal beating - this is the only moment where she is depicted as not fighting because she is unable to move. At this point, she is depicted as using her wits, pleading with Stanley to let her stimulate him by hand because she is hurt internally. Paradoxically, he becomes

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

upset and enraged when she falls unconscious, in spite of asserting his desire for Jennifer's "total submission."²⁶¹ This reflects larger societal concerns over conceptions of masculinity in the face of shifting conceptions of femininity and female empowerment. The man, in this scenario, is enraged by both feminine passivity *and* activity – in neither case can the woman escape patriarchal response and domination.

If Matthew is the organizing principle for Jennifer's rapes, he is also the organizing principle for her death. The group is depicted as pressuring him to return to the house to kill Jennifer, although the tone with which they pressure him changes here; when they exhort him to rape her, they are abusive and derogatory, when they tell him to kill her they are soft and friendly. After securing a promise that the group will not leave him, Matthew walks inside, but is ultimately unable to stab her. Instead, he wets the knife in her blood as he cries, and runs outside to the praise of his friends. It can be argued that *I Spit On Your Grave* depicts Jennifer and Matthew, both, as victims of patriarchy, although in very different ways. In an early scene when the men are fishing, Matthew is degraded for being a virgin and is later ridiculed for his inability to "finish"; during his rape of Jennifer, he is unable to sustain an erection, in part because of the criticisms of his friends. Matthew is also depicted as lacking the will to kill Jennifer, faking her death and sparing her life. Although Jennifer's rape is ostensibly *for* Matthew, then, it also happens *to* him, serving not only as his initiation into manhood and Johnny's gang but also as the reason for his eventual death.

I Spit On Your Grave not only graphically depicts rape and revenge, it also pays attention to the transition between the two states. As noted previously, Sarah Projansky in

²⁶¹ "Scene 7," *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

Watching Rape argues that films presenting a *feminist* response to rape deploy acts of self-defense and revenge.²⁶² Included in these are films that work to represent the time prior to the revenge and the female character's attempt to heal. *I Spit On Your Grave* does this; it maintains Jennifer's perspective post-rape. The latter half of the film is shot from her point of view, showing her transition into a person seeking justice through violence. Immediately after the assault, Jennifer is depicted struggling to clean herself by taking a shower (a well-documented response to sexual assault), and then crying in a robe. We see her lying in bed covered in towels, sitting in her hammock where the psychological abuse began, and finally sitting in a chair looking blank as she smokes a cigarette. Her clothing shifts at this point in the film to dark layers, which cover her completely. This sequence depicts her move through grief to a grim, quiet acceptance.

Act Two

Throughout Jennifer's revenge, the camera is aligned with her point of view, or depicts her as she watches the rapists. It is notable that the rape and revenge sequences in the film begin in exactly the same way. Andy and Stanley are once again shown riding by the house, only this time it is to see whether she is alive. This act spurs Jennifer to action, and the next shot we see of her is one where she is dressed all in black, checking a gun for bullets, every inch the female avenger. Recognizing that her actions are wrong, she is shown visiting a Church. In this scene, audiences are given a sense of Jennifer's moral compass and the fact that she has a conscience; she recognizes that what she is about to do is wrong, and that her justice is not everyone's justice.

²⁶² Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 58.

One of the most troubling aspects of *I Spit On Your Grave*, and perhaps of the genre as a whole, is the erotic way in which the female characters are shown taking their revenge. During the revenge sequence, Jennifer is depicted utilizing her sexuality instrumentally, especially in relation to Matthew and Johnny. Her revenge is carefully tailored to each man, using their own sexual weaknesses to entrap them, for example, she indulges Matthew's romantic fantasy and plays off Johnny's machismo. In her revenge on Matthew, Jennifer wears a loose, white nightgown with a slit up the side. The juxtaposition is powerful, as Jennifer is shown to be purposefully using the tropes of innocence and virginity in order to enact violence. She entices Matthew to have sex with her, rendering him passive by distracting him with her body, though it must be noted that Jennifer does not actively participate in the intercourse. Her arms stay at her sides, her face tilted upwards to escape Matthew's lips, and her legs lay limply on the ground. Though she uses sexuality to her advantage, she is not shown as enjoying it; it is only for the purpose of killing Matthew. Halfway through their sexual encounter, she reaches for a noose she has hung from a tree. As Matthew ejaculates, she wraps the noose around his neck and hangs him. He is depicted as finally able to finish sexually, but losing his life as a result. While Jennifer uses her sexuality in order to bring Matthew to the cabin, she does so in order to render him passive and enact her own agency. Her sexuality allows her to get him to drop the knife, and drop his guard, and, eventually she is able to kill him.

Jennifer is also depicted as using her sexuality to get revenge on Johnny. She plays off Johnny's egocentrism to bring him into the woods and at gunpoint forces him to strip. After Jennifer shoots at his feet in warning, Johnny blames everyone in the group

but himself, and then blames Jennifer for “asking for it” by wearing revealing clothing.²⁶³ Jennifer appears to respond positively by dropping the gun and allowing him to put his clothes back on before taking him back to the house. The next shot is one of Johnny in the bathtub, and Jennifer at the mirror doing her hair. Again, although Jennifer is shown using her sexuality, it is represented as having strengthened her resolve, and allowing her able to keep Johnny passive. The scene’s romantic undertones underscore “the threat of violence rather than the promise of sexual pleasure”²⁶⁴ as Jennifer begins to stimulate Johnny with her hands, and then castrate him. The scene closes with her listening to opera downstairs as Johnny screams upstairs, howling for his mother.

Jennifer’s use of her sexual power is rendered particularly contradictory because audiences know she has a gun. The film makes a point of showing her with it. Why, then, does she never use it to kill? Clearly, the film suggests that, for Jennifer, the men are not good enough to simply be shot. Johnny is the worst offender – he is the one who orchestrates her attack, is the first to rape her, and the only one to blame everything on everyone else (including Jennifer herself). He is also the only “family man”, and is shown with his wife and two children at the beginning of Jennifer’s revenge. One would expect his death to be the most visceral – and it is. However, Johnny’s castration is neither immediate nor planned ahead of time. Instead, Jennifer first appears to be content to shoot him, but when he blames her for the rape, she changes her mind, and decides to extend Johnny’s pain. Johnny must suffer as she did; castration is the only appropriate response for the leader of such a brutal attack.

²⁶³ “Scene 10,” *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

²⁶⁴ Jacinda Read, *The new avengers: Feminism, femininity and the rape-revenge cycle* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 41.

The film flouts generic conventions by not showing Johnny's actual death. Instead, the camera follows Jennifer downstairs as she calmly has a drink and listens to opera as over the chorus of Johnny's screams. The image of Jennifer is one of calm acceptance, particularly as Johnny's death cries end. She then quietly burns his clothes in the fireplace, and cleans the bloody bathroom. The death appears to have brought her some measure of healing and renewed power, as she is shown lying quietly in the sun the next day in the hammock where her sexual harassment began.

Following such a violent climax, the deaths of Andy and Stanley are represented in a comparatively low-key manner. Realizing both Johnny and Matthew are now missing, they arrive at the cabin to kill Jennifer, only to be outsmarted²⁶⁵, beaten in a struggle, and pushed into the river. The film echoes the scene prior to her rape, as Jennifer circles them both with the boat, striking one with an ax and killing the other with the boat propeller; the tool that initially was used to facilitate her rape is the final tool she uses for revenge. Immediately afterwards, Jennifer simply turns the boat around and rides into the sunset.

I Spit On Your Grave (2010)

Much like the original, in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010), the female protagonist, Jennifer Hills (Sarah Butler), arrives at a cabin in the woods to write a novel. After pulling into a gas station, she meets gas attendants Johnny (Jeff Branson), Stanley (Daniel Franzese), and Andy (Rodney Eastman). After rejecting Johnny's sexual

²⁶⁵ And, in Stanley's case, again sexually manipulated. She sneaks onto the boat and tricking him into thinking she will kiss him, pushes him off the boat in order to terrorize him the same way she was terrorized before her rape.

advances, she makes herself at home in the cabin before meeting another member of the group, Matthew (Chad Lindberg), who fixes her toilet and sink. The next night, the group arrives at the cabin in order to rid Matthew of his virginity. Jennifer is sexually assaulted and manages to escape before she is raped, but is ultimately captured by the local Sheriff, the ringleader of the gang, who also rapes her. Ultimately, Jennifer is able to save herself and survive in the woods before she begins her revenge.

The revenge portion of *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) is shot largely from the perspective of the male rapists. Matthew, deeply disturbed by what he has done, is tricked by Jennifer into the dilapidated cabin she has been using while she heals and is presumably killed. Jennifer then captures and kills both Andy and Stanley. While these two sequences of revenge are completed relatively quickly, Jennifer takes the time to taunt Johnny outside his house before capturing him and castrating him, ultimately killing him. In her most elaborate ruse yet, Jennifer must fake the kidnapping of the Sheriff's young daughter, to get him alone. In an elaborately rigged trap, it is revealed that Matthew is still alive and in the same room as the Sheriff and both are killed by shotgun blasts. The film ends with Jennifer sitting outside, listening to the screams from within the cabin.

Act One

The remake of *I Spit On Your Grave* immediately marks itself as different from the original's representation of an expensively and revealingly dressed Jennifer in the opening scene of the film. Despite expensive sunglasses, Jennifer in the remake is dressed down in a flannel shirt and jeans. Instead of visually entrenching a city/country divide, Jennifer blends into the country setting in this version of the film. Still, Johnny is

shown immediately coming on to her: “So you know you’re running a little hot. Maybe I should check up under the hood for you?”²⁶⁶ What follows is a series of embarrassments for Johnny: Jennifer rejects and laughs at his pickup line (“How’s that line working for you?”), he is derided and insulted by his peers, and Jennifer scares him by accidentally setting off the panic button of her car. The final blow is Jennifer’s “keep the change” line, which positions her as powerful and in control. The film depicts a class-privileged Jennifer as metaphorically castrating Johnny in front of his friends. In *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), Jennifer is presented as very aware of how she is seen and the power she has over men before the rapes take place. In the original, Jennifer appears mostly unaware of the leers of Johnny and her own sexual power, freely carrying on conversation with him. Compared to the original, *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) sets an ominous tone off the top with the tense interaction between Jennifer and Johnny.

Another significant change from the original is apparent in this opening sequence. Where Johnny was the leader in the original, he is now merely one of the boys, and must prove his worth. The character of Matthew, so central to the 1978 version, is not the primary focus in the remake. In fact, Johnny’s leadership is the main question, whereas Matthew’s virginity is represented as an afterthought. The loss of power in front of his friends by a girl, which effectively amounts to Johnny’s emasculation, becomes the initial motivating device for the rapes. This is most clearly seen in the fishing sequence, which (except for dialogue) mirrors the original, depicting the formulation of the plan to rape Jennifer. The scene begins with a focus on Matthew, but rapidly turns to

²⁶⁶ “Scene 1,” *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

Johnny. Matthew is positioned here as sexually superior to Johnny for having fixed “her pipes” and getting “a kiss for servicing her.”²⁶⁷²⁶⁸ Although Matthew is clearly *an* object of derision for the group, he is not *the* object. Instead, Johnny is forced to defend his poor performance in relation to Jennifer and is no longer represented as the unquestioned leader of the group.

The rhetoric of the “city girl” sexuality is changed significantly in the remake. Instead of positing how easy it is to “get” a girl from the big city, the group now agrees that a “city bitch like that is ungettable.”²⁶⁹ It is generally agreed upon that if Johnny doesn’t have a chance with Jennifer, no one does, though it is never made explicit why Johnny is the best contender. In this way, every member of the group is positioned as having a stake in Johnny’s performance. The fact that the group challenges Johnny’s masculinity by implying that he cannot get Jennifer incites him to fight back by stating that Jennifer is in the country “for one reason and one reason only” - sex. Johnny is shown as being backed into a corner; his masculinity has been questioned, and he needs to prove his assertion that Jennifer is a “big city cock-teasing whore.” The solution is to make Jennifer give them “the time of day,” thereby restoring Johnny’s masculinity and “show[ing] [Matthew] the way,” ridding him of his virginity. In this sense, the remake drastically turns away from the original’s depiction of the rape as organized around Matthew. It is now Johnny’s threatened masculinity that is the organizing principle for the rape; Matthew’s ‘problem’ can be solved in the process.

²⁶⁷ In the remake, Matthew first meets Jennifer as her plumber. He fixes her pipes, and she gratefully kisses him on the cheek.

²⁶⁸ “Scene 2,” *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

In the original, the rape is largely perpetrated to force Matthew from a feminized position into a stereotypically masculine one. In this sense, we could read *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) as reflecting the post-Vietnam War victimized male body, burdened by the loss of war. The rape is motivated by the collective group's need for each male to succeed; Matthew's virginity, his seemingly feminized attributes, marks him as a danger to the group. However, in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010), this sense of collective masculinity has fractured. Johnny's masculinity is directly questioned, and his performance as a man in doubt because of his inability to "get" Jennifer. Matthew is represented as an object of pity because of his mental disability, while Johnny is ridiculed for his lack of masculine prowess with women.

The motivation for Jennifer's rape in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) reflects the general views of masculinity at this time, which can be linked largely to economic shifts. By 2010, as documented in Hanna Rosin's "The End of Men," women comprised the majority of the United States workforce for the first time ever. The majority of the jobs lost in the 2008 recession were "overwhelmingly male and deeply identified with macho: construction, manufacturing, high finance."²⁷⁰ The hardest hit were the American working class. Coupled with rising numbers of single women, this new crisis of masculinity echoes the backlash against the 1970s second-wave feminist movement because "a new kind of alpha female has appeared, stirring up anxiety and, occasionally, fear."²⁷¹ Rising female power coupled with political and economic changes has led to a decrease in male power, and consequently a crisis of male identity. *I Spit On Your Grave*

²⁷⁰ Hanna Rosin, "The End of Men," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/308135/?single_page=true.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

(2010) portrays this loss of male power and positions the rape as a desperate attempt to recapture some measure of control by dominating a woman represented as out of their league because of her gender *and* economic power.

Unlike the original, the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave*, however, represents this crisis in masculinity through the rapist's eyes, rather than from the perspective of the female victim. Before the rape takes place, the addition of a video camera to the film's narrative creates a peeping tom effect. The addition of a video camera reflects an overall trend in the horror genre to appropriate and work with the idea of "found footage."²⁷² However, it also adds a voyeuristic sense to the narrative that is highly problematic. Before the rape takes place, Jennifer is shown through the lens of a video camera, spilling wine on herself and disrobing to clean it. The film utilizes the handheld camera shots to simulate someone standing outside her window filming her. It is not clear that the characters were present until later when the handheld camera becomes an integral part of Jennifer's rape; Stanley, in particular, is shown constantly holding the camera and carefully making sure Jennifer's trauma is filmed. Indeed, the only time Stanley puts the camera down is so he can achieve the best angle when she is forced to lie down.

The use of such shots and the conceit of the hand held film camera within the narrative has a profound effect on the sensibility of the film as a whole. It collapses any notion of viewer distance from the attackers and simultaneously pushes the viewer farther from any possible identification with Jennifer. The handheld camera adds yet another

²⁷² "Found footage" is a popular sub-genre of horror films first majorly popularized with the Blair Witch Project (1999). In this sub-genre, the film takes on a documentary aesthetic where the camera is a known quantity and the "characters" film what happens to them. The resulting narrative arises because the camera is later "found" and shown to others.

filter through which the spectator views Jennifer, taking on the perspective of her attackers and rendering her an object of an abstracted and threatening gaze. It effectively creates a narrative within the narrative, whereby Jennifer's psychological and physical trauma becomes masturbatory material for her attackers— especially given the fact that one of the group members keeps the tape. Both Jennifer and her rape are doubly spectacularized, first through the lens of the handheld camera and then through the lens of film itself. In this way, the spectator is forced into the position of Peeping Tom, “whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.”²⁷³ As a result, the remake comes across as unconcerned with issues of female empowerment, and more concerned with entrenching the masculine, pornographic fantasy of domination over women.

The remake's perspective on the extended gang rape sequence vacillates between medium long shots and a video camera's point of view, both of which show Jennifer's trauma as the group watches. The sequence begins with extensive dialogue. Johnny, Andy, and Stanley taunt Jennifer as Matthew sits in the corner, at first unwilling to participate. Johnny forces her to drink vodka, repeatedly questioning what she thinks of the group. Johnny is preoccupied by the idea that she feels superior: “Because I'm sure when you're out there in the city with all you're hoity-toity rich friends, I bet you can throw 'em back with the best of 'em. Now can't you?”²⁷⁴ Jennifer is dehumanized and literally treated like an animal, forced to become the group's “pretty little show horse,” simulating oral sex on a loaded gun, and a vodka bottle. Johnny continues to pressure

²⁷³ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 61.

²⁷⁴ “Scene 3,” *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

Matthew to rape Jennifer by stating “We’re doing this for you. Go prove it to me.” At this moment, Jennifer turns from a passive victim and attacks both Andy and Stanley, fleeing the cabin.

Jennifer’s run into the woods reveals yet another important change in the remake from the original: the addition of the character of a Sheriff, who is depicted as a corrupt rapist and murderer. Whereas the original *I Spit On Your Grave* offers no commentary on the law and Jennifer merely does what she feels she has to do to rectify the situation, the remake inserts another point of view. By including a character representing the law, who is directly involved in her rape and later justifies the rape with the view that “she was asking for it”, the Sheriff exemplifies the position that the law is “directly or indirectly complicit and that men are thus not just individually but corporately liable.”²⁷⁵ When he is introduced, neither the audience nor Jennifer know his true intentions or real nature until he takes her back to the house and asks her to explain what has happened. As Jennifer asserts she is the victim, the Sheriff accuses her of drinking, smoking marijuana and lying about the attack:

“Ma’am, you’ve been drinking, smoking marijuana cigarettes. You got enough booze in here to put the whole town three sheets to the wind. You’re running around in your sleeping garments at the crack of dawn. You’ve got to see this from my point of view.”²⁷⁶

By addressing the “she asked for it” mentality in the character of the Sheriff, this sequence highlights the paradox of female vulnerability. Jennifer is vulnerable no matter what she does. She is blamed for bringing enough alcohol to the cabin for the duration of her stay and for smoking pot, which is posited by the Sheriff as making her vulnerable to

²⁷⁵ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 139.

²⁷⁶ “Scene 4,” *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

rape in the first place. After being victimized, she races from the house in her pajamas, placing her in a vulnerable position once again when she literally runs into the Sheriff. Jennifer cannot escape victimization (or blame) within or outside the walls of her cabin. The film dramatizes the fact that women are constantly under the threat of rape, and that their vulnerability is always likely going to be construed as their own fault. Though the film does not clearly support this double bind that women find themselves in, it does tacitly represent it as fact. And, as a result of the film's representation of both the rape and the subsequent revenge through the eyes of the rapists, it does not represent Jennifer's situation sympathetically.

The character of the Sheriff acts as a symbol for institutional corruption in the film. Jennifer does not actively seek the law and quite literally runs into it, in the figure of the sheriff, as she flees in the woods, but her trust in its authority is immediate. It is not until the sheriff begins to blame her that she realizes something is wrong. The film quite literally represents that "(p)ower is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman ... True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness – the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong."²⁷⁷ The addition of the Sheriff into the narrative of *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) represents the feminist idea that men are not just individually responsible; moreover, this is about the complicity of larger social institutions.

As noted above, Jennifer is constantly under the threat of rape both inside and outside her home. Faced with institutional corruption, Jennifer is further vulnerable no matter the actions she takes. In this way, *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) represents female

²⁷⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," 66.

vulnerability as multi-layered and complex, subject to contextual factors as much as personal choice. The sequence progresses with the sheriff forcing her against the wall and sexually assaulting her with a shotgun. It becomes clear that not only is he a corrupt Sheriff, but he is the actual leader of the group. As Jennifer's humiliation continues, the group continually dehumanizes her and reasserts that she is a "show horse" that needs to be tamed: "On your feet, show horse. On your feet or we're not gonna get your sugar cube." The group then forcefully urges Matthew to rape Jennifer: "get your clothes off, boy. We're gonna get your cherry popped."²⁷⁸

Here, we see the theme of male group hierarchy, noted by Clover in the original film, reemerge. The rapes are represented as essentially comprising a "sporting competition," where Matthew must be ordered off the bench.²⁷⁹ In both the original and the remake, Matthew is initially unwilling and unable. He refuses to even remove his clothes until Johnny threatens to mutilate Jennifer's genitals. However, the similarities in the depiction of Matthew's rape of Jennifer between 1978 and 2010 films end there. Unlike the original, where Matthew is not able to finish raping or killing Jennifer, in the remake Matthew is able to ejaculate and is much more physically violent. He ejaculates while choking her; the proportional increase in his violence also results in his remorse post-rape. This creates a very different character, and results in a different revenge sequence for Matthew.

Mirroring the original, Jennifer leaves the cabin in shock and walks through the woods naked. The group follows her, wrestles her to the ground, and continues to torture

²⁷⁸ "Scene 5," *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

²⁷⁹ Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 122.

her as Johnny asserts, “that filly’s got a few more races to run.”²⁸⁰ As Andy plays a harmonica slowly²⁸¹, the Sheriff brutally anally rapes Jennifer. Unlike the original, the anal rape is explicitly stated as opposed to assumed. At this point, the camera takes Jennifer’s point of view for the first time in the entire film. The film falls out of focus as Johnny unzips his pants to orally rape her, fading to black as she loses consciousness. Unlike the original, the remake only shows Matthew’s and the Sheriff’s rape of Jennifer, simply implying that the rest have taken place when Jennifer regains consciousness and hears the men talking.

The rape of Jennifer’s unconscious body forms yet another difference between original and remake. In the former, Stanley thinks he wants “total submission” but is angered by the complete passivity represented by her unconsciousness; in the latter, Andy and Stanley have no similar issues. This can be seen as highlighting some differences in general cultural views about women’s sexual position between the original and the remake. In the 1970s, Andy and Stanley want the promise of a liberated woman who is actively and eagerly up for sex; they take it when there is no consent and back off when Jennifer stops fighting. The male desire for total domination is also represented in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) through Stanley’s filming of her throughout the film, and in his insistence upon keeping the tape. Sex with Jennifer, whether she is conscious or not, is portrayed as a heterosexual, pornographic fantasy wherein female pleasure (here, female consent) is secondary to the portrayal of male power.

²⁸⁰ “Scene 6,” *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

²⁸¹ The use of a harmonica in Jennifer’s rape sequence is a nod to the original film, where Andy also plays a harmonica as a soundtrack to her rape. It is also important to note that the harmonica is an important marker of gender, place and class, adding to the symbolism of the poor country redneck.

One of the most significant changes to the *I Spit On Your Grave* narrative in the remake, however, is the fact that Jennifer saves herself instead of being spared by Matthew's inability to kill her; she jumps off a bridge and stays under the water in order to avoid getting shot. This change has two important implications. First, saving herself conveys her character's inherent power and sets the audience up for the revenge to come. Second, it marks an important shift in how the narrative progresses post-rape; Jennifer is not only lost to the group, she is lost to spectators. Instead of providing Jennifer's point of view as she heals and transforms from victim to revenge-seeker, spectators see the revenge take place from the perspective of the rapists, as they frantically look for Jennifer and are methodically hunted by her.

Act Two

Critical analyses of *I Spit On Your Grave* often fail to note the significance of the order in which Jennifer takes her revenge.²⁸² In the original, Jennifer kills Matthew and Johnny first. One could assume that this is because she considers these two men to be the most culpable. The 1978 film definitely spends more time depicting her revenge on Matthew and Johnny, with Andy and Stanley given less time because of their peripheral participation in her rape. In the remake, Jennifer kills her rapists in the opposite order in which she was raped²⁸³, and the film narrative spends significant time on her torture of each rapist. The order of her assault is: Matthew, Sheriff Storch, Johnny, Andy, and Stanley. This significantly affects the tone of the film. In the original, Andy and Stanley are killed last and with comparatively less fanfare than Johnny and Matthew. In the

²⁸² See analyses of Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Peter Lehman, et. al.

²⁸³ Stanley and Andy are killed first, followed by Johnny's castration, and the Sheriff's and Matthew's deaths occur simultaneously.

remake, Jennifer's revenge steadily builds to a climax, though Johnny's castration remains the central moment of revenge.

In addition to the shift in the camera's perspective, there is another problematic aspect to Jennifer's revenge taking in the remake. In the original, Jennifer's revenge on her rapists is brutal, but the killings are relatively simply enacted. In the remake, the revenge is shown to be methodical, complicated, and tailored to reflect the rapes that occurred. The remake also extends the killing sequences, mixing torture with dialogue. The violence is so broad it verges on comical, with Jennifer rigging elaborately vicious traps. Jennifer turns the tables on her attackers and plays on characteristics of their assault on her. She lures Andy and Stanley by playing a harmonica, the soundtrack to her rape. Stanley is taunted with the camera he used to film the rapes, and Andy is drowned (though not to the point of death) to pay for his earlier "suck it, bitch" comments. Stanley is ultimately killed when crows eat him alive, the eyes he once so gleefully set on Jennifer's trauma held open by fishhooks so crows get to them first. Andy is forced to lower himself into a tub of acid, burning himself alive, just as he threw matches at Jennifer while she was sexually assaulted.

Jennifer's treatment of Johnny in the remake is starkly different from the original. In the former, she castrates him in a scenario that is chiefly disturbing because of its seductive undertones. Here, Johnny is rigged up by Jennifer to be in a forced standing position. Echoing the excruciatingly long pre-rape scene in the house, Jennifer has him show her his teeth before forcibly removing three with pliers, all the while mockingly calling him a stallion. Turning his rhetoric and tone against him, she calls him a stallion because he called her a filly. She grants him the power he used against her, but only to set

up his own downfall. She extends the metaphor: “You know what they do to horses that can’t be tamed, Johnny? ... You geld them.”²⁸⁴ With this line, Jennifer castrates Johnny, and then forces his penis into his mouth. Just as he forcibly penetrated her, she does so to him.

Jennifer’s revenge on the Sheriff is the most elaborate. She impersonates his daughter’s teacher to gain access to his home, and then pretends to have kidnapped his child. The Sheriff, and the audience, are led to believe that the Sheriff’s daughter is in the room, hidden under tarps in the corner, as her father is tortured. Even more sadistically, Jennifer ties a length of rope to the covered bundle meant to be the daughter, which is attached to the trigger of a shotgun penetrating the Sheriff’s anus. If the “girl” moves, her father will be shot. The parallel to Jennifer’s rape is clear: anal rape begets anal rape, with Jennifer utilizing the Sheriff’s other phallic tool: his shotgun.

Although it is the most disturbing sequence of the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave*, this sequence also contains the most powerful moment for Jennifer. Asking the Sheriff if he can imagine someone attacking his daughter as Jennifer was attacked, he pleads, “she’s just an innocent girl.” Jennifer crouches, looks him in the eye and replies, “so was I.”²⁸⁵ The moment is powerful for the spectator as well as for Jennifer, because this is the first time she directly acknowledges her trauma. It is also the first and only time Jennifer explicitly frames her actions as revenge for her rape and her own stolen innocence. Jennifer faces her accuser, asserting her right not only to her body, but also to the moral high ground. In the original, Jennifer asks for forgiveness before seeking

²⁸⁴ “Scene 11,” *I Spit On Your Grave*, directed by Steven R. Monroe (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

justice; in the remake, she simply takes it, because the legal system has already been proven to be corrupt.

However, Jennifer's comparison between herself and the Sheriff's innocent daughter has complications of its own. It is arguably the most powerful moment in her revenge because she gives testimony to her rape, but her use of another innocent's life in service of her own revenge does not evoke sympathy. Jennifer takes the tarp off the covered bundle and the "girl" is revealed: it is Matthew, unconscious, with the Sheriff's life literally in his hands. Though Jennifer As the Sheriff goes from begging to yelling at Jennifer, she walks outside. The film's point of view switches back and forth from Jennifer sitting outside, and Matthew waking up. The gun goes off, through the Sheriff and into Matthew, killing them both. Jennifer smirks as the screen fades to black. This is a deliberate homage to the original film, where Jennifer also leaves the immediate scene of her revenge and waits for it to be finished. Where the original *I Spit On Your Grave* ends on a rather hopeful note, with Jennifer literally riding her boat into the sunset in control of her own path, the remake ends darkly, with Jennifer sitting stock still on a branch, her future uncertain.

Although Jennifer does not use her sexuality as a tool in the remake, she also does not experience any empowerment or freedom in the end. Heller-Nicholas discusses this in her analysis of the remake vs. original, specifically in relation to the problematic eroticization of revenge:

Although Butler's Jennifer does not use her sexuality to seduce her rapists in the same way Keaton's does, it is still important to note that from the audience perspective at least, the new Jennifer is still "eroticized." In the bathtub scene in the recent version, for example, she wears simple, unisex-styled jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt. But this top is thin and light-colored, allowing her erect nipples to be clearly visible at times. Keaton's

Jennifer is far more ‘girly’ than her 2010 counterpart, but although Jennifer here may not be feminized, she is certainly still “eroticized.”²⁸⁶

Heller-Nicholas’ argument certainly reflects the paradoxical nature of rape-revenge – that of feminine vs. feminist and victim vs. avenger – and the ways in which representations of women cannot seem to escape eroticization. However, it is important to note that the film does not linger on these shots, nor are her erect nipples of any importance to the scene itself. It is arguably the only eroticized portion of the revenge sequence of events. Indeed, the Jennifer in the remake seems barely human as she commits unrealistic acts of violence, and, as a result, audience identification with her is sacrificed on some level. This can also be seen to be a result of the lack of representation of her healing between the rape and the revenge. Dehumanized in her rape, audiences are presented with little more than a killing machine; with her innocence destroyed, only revenge is left. Our final image of her is one of a smirking, wraith-like figure.

Conclusion

In 1978, *I Spit On Your Grave* was released with an alternate title – *Day of the Woman*. In some sense, the original film successfully presents (purposefully or not) a second-wave feminist heroine. Jennifer’s success as an independent, sexual woman threatens the male group, who force her to submit to them sexually in a display of control meant to reinstate their power. *I Spit On Your Grave* sidesteps the notion of institutional justice by ignoring it, focusing instead on a single woman’s drive for revenge. In this

²⁸⁶ Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, 177.

sense, *I Spit On Your Grave* is the day of the woman – when abused, Jennifer deals with the problem in the only way she knows will guarantee success - by doing it herself.

1978's *I Spit On Your Grave* represents and reproduces broader cultural conflict over the female body. As critics have contended, cinematic representations from the Vietnam War-era suggest a “scapegoating of the female body for Vietnam-related social unrest.”²⁸⁷ *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) represents this social unrest in the form of a crisis of masculinity in the wake of the Vietnam War and second-wave feminism. Jennifer's body, and through it her sexuality, is perceived by the men inside the narrative as threatening, uncontrollable, and “asking for it”; in response, Jennifer's revenge can be read as a purposeful representational reversal of this misconception.

Depicted entirely as a struggle for power and an attempt to mitigate the threat she poses to the established patriarchal order, *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) can be read as a narrative about male anxiety during the rise of second-wave feminism. By 1978, second-wave feminism had altered the socio-political landscape drastically. As discussed in Chapter 2, feminism emerged in confluence with a number of different movements, including discourses about a new ‘sexual revolution’. Consequently, perceptions of women and female sexual power irrevocably changed. At this time, the single, white, independent female rose to prominence in popular media narratives, displacing the housewife. This change was seen by many as a hostile reversal of the heteronormative nuclear family and as comprising a direct attack on masculinity.²⁸⁸ The rights afforded to women and their bodies also began to change as a result of second wave feminism. As

²⁸⁷ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 116.

²⁸⁸ Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

noted in Chapter 2, the anti-rape movement, a chief second-wave feminist concern, argued that women were vulnerable to rape because of political, cultural, social, and institutional misogyny. In an effort to counteract this unrelenting vulnerability, the anti-rape movement focused on teaching women not only to arm themselves physically and mentally against the threat of rape, and against the trauma of rape should it occur. As a result of these efforts, misconceptions, such as the woman “asking for it”, began to be viewed as fundamentally flawed. Second wave feminism asserted that a sexually expressive woman, or one perceived as somehow provocative by men, did not ‘deserve’ to be violated.

The changing conception of women’s power and control over her own body are obviously at play in *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978). The idea that Jennifer is asking for it, represented in the dialogue of her four attackers, is shown as dangerously ridiculous; indeed, the belief costs all of the men their lives. Additionally, *I Spit On Your Grave*’s refusal to introduce any institutional authority in its narrative is itself an indictment of the law’s own criminal misconduct – ignoring the very real problem of rape. As Susan Brownmiller, author of *Against Our Will*, claimed at the time: “sexual hostility ... [is] not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged.”²⁸⁹ Brownmiller argues that this is due to any number of factors, including but not limited to: cultural ideologies perpetuating the submission of women, lack of women in all areas of law enforcement, the law’s lack of understanding of issues of consent, the topic of rape generally being seen as taboo, and the contemporary legal conception of rape still being rooted in women as property to be

²⁸⁹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1975), 389-392, 395.

owned.²⁹⁰ Cultural forms and practices aimed at male pleasure are also a target of Brownmiller's argument, in particular prostitution and pornography. The filmmakers obviously take up critiques like Brownmiller's, as they depict Jennifer as relying on no one but herself, and as enacting a kind of collective justice by preventing further rape. Jennifer is a second-wave feminist character: collected, intelligent, and sure in her own actions.

Of course, it must be noted that one of Jennifer's strength is her sexuality, and the sexualization of her revenge is most assuredly problematic. This characterization of Jennifer as using sexuality as a tool – her primary tool, in fact – echoes contextual concerns of the time. The sexual revolution and its effect on second-wave feminism helped to reproduce these types of characters where sexuality was represented as a fluid, personal choice, no longer socially demonized.²⁹¹ Yet, while women became holders and perpetrators of sexual power, men were anxious and uncertain about what this change meant from them. Consequently, men feared women's sexuality and their own inability to resist it.

For *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), this complicated and uncertain terrain of gender politics is a central theme. Jennifer's rapists hold power by raping her, but Jennifer takes this away. She tricks both Matthew and Johnny into believing she wants them, consents, and is submissive. Her sexual power thus becomes the way in which she orchestrates particular revenge sequences to fit each rapist. Though her means may be sexual, the end result is such that no more rapes are possible by these men. The character of Jennifer

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 376-396.

²⁹¹ Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

personifies the need for self-defense lessons, but also shows the way in which women can use their sexual difference and sexuality to regain control. Thus, Jennifer represents a complex feminist avenger and a heroine of the rape-reform movement; there is no justification for rape and violence and women will defend their bodies in whatever manner they deem justifiable. However, the question of whether female empowerment is based solely on phallic terms is a valid one, and remains undecided. This author argues that, for better or worse, in its depiction of revenge, the original *I Spit On Your Grave* uses female sexuality as an access point through which Jennifer gains empowerment.

In comparison, the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) focuses far more on the male, rapist perspective than its predecessor. This complicates any feminist discourse the film may have. Though the motivation behind the rapes is essentially the same – managing female threats and asserting male dominance within a male group – Jennifer’s point of view is secondary. The first half of the film outlines the reasoning for the rape, and the second the fate of the men as they are pursued. In doing so, the film positions Jennifer as victim first and killer second, her character is rendered more similar to the iconic slasher film killer than to that of a feminist avenger. Much like the slasher film killers made popular in films like *Halloween* (1978), Jennifer is rarely seen and ghostlike in her ability to appear anywhere as she first stalks and then systematically murders her prey. Jennifer is never shown dealing with her rape or as plotting her revenge, instead her character becomes a caricature of a ruthless murderer – a killing machine. While, her capacity for revenge is shown to be total, the reasoning behind her need for justice is downplayed. Jennifer’s rape is key to the storyline only insofar as it makes for male pleasure and dominance, and motivates the extreme and grotesque revenge killings,

which are the focus of the film. Most generously, the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) can be read a post-traumatic text, wherein the desire for power and control on the part of the men ultimately dooms them while Jennifer's revenge offers no comfort to her or the viewers whatsoever.

Further complicating the "new" narrative of *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) is the introduction of law enforcement as directly complicit in the rape and attempted murder of Jennifer. This, too, is indicative of a cultural change. As noted above, the original makes no mention of the law, reflecting the way in which rape was consistently ignored by police and legislation at the time. *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) successfully creates a heroine who attacks female victimization and the complicity of the law in her empowering revenge; *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010), however, is predominantly a film about male loss of power.

I Spit On Your Grave (2010) does not portray its male rapist characters as sympathetic, nor does it suggest that Jennifer deserved her rape. However, the film's narrative is largely drive by the male characters and shot from their point of view, resulting in an extremely problematic film. Whereas the first half of the film focuses on the trauma to the female body, the second focuses on the destruction of the male. In her analysis of *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), Carol Clover argues that there is potential for male identification with the final girl Jennifer represents. That potential no longer exists with *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010), as Jennifer's character is actively de-politicized. Rape is used as a narrative conceit to motivate a series of over the top killings. Indeed, there is no comfortable subject position for audience members, male or female, to adopt in the

remake. Instead, one can only assume that audiences are expected to enjoy the film at one remove – for its spectacular scenes of violence.

The tendency for the female body to bear the burden of over signification has not changed in the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010). Only now the female body bears the burden of signifying the death of feminism – or the dominance of a post-feminist era. Similar to the way in which *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) reflected a post-Vietnam era marked by fractured masculinity and cultural strife, so too *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) is situated in relation to the strife and uncertainty associated with the invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq War. In both films, the female body works to express cultural anxiety. In its most recent incarnation, *I Spit On Your Grave*, relegates the woman first to an object of derision, and then into a greater threat as a psycho-killer.

Instead of an empowered female taking her revenge, Jennifer is now the embodiment of the “f-word, something dangerous and profane, an explosive term angry, unfeminine women use to identify themselves.”²⁹² In the remake, Jennifer’s revenge is represented as fueled by something other than a desire for safety or a path to healing. Instead, she is portrayed as an antagonistic force – a deep threat to cultural sanity and order. Where the original film depicts Jennifer as satisfied in her revenge, the remake depicts Jennifer as a ghost of her former self. She is not the feminist avenger, the feminine victim, nor Clover’s final girl – instead, she has simply become another Hollywood serial killer. As the feminist undercurrent of the original *I Spit On Your Grave* is erased in the remake, women’s liberation appears to be moving in reverse, closer to 1972 than to 2012. Echoing this, the remake ends darkly– there is no boat ride into the

²⁹² Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 137.

promising sunset of the future for the *I Spit On Your Grave*, or, it seems, its female audience.

Conclusion

Like so many feminist critics who have attempted to understand horror films, I have grappled with the complex reality of these cultural texts. Born a full fifteen years after the first of these films was produced and released, I was first drawn to these films as a horror fan who enjoyed “extreme” cinema. My emerging position as a committed feminist, however, immediately challenged the pleasure I got from these films as a horror fan. The rape-revenge narrative brought together, or into conflict, a series of interests and concerns that I wished to explore as both a young feminist and a young horror fan: genre cinema, feminist politics, and the issue of film violence.

From the start, I sensed the originals of these films were positioned in a different era – that of second-wave feminism – and, watching in the late 1990s, I felt nostalgic for this time, when it seemed as though women were really challenging the dominant patriarchal structure. The films seemed to contain the kernels of a feminist politics, something sorely lacking from most of the cultural products of the late 90s. Even when these films seemed to contain a negative view of feminism in parts, it was an improvement on the complete absence of any discussion of feminism that characterized the zeitgeist of my teenaged years.

In this analysis of both versions of *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*, this thesis has attempted to trace discourses of female power, masculinity, and the heteronormative family in the 1970s and into the late 2000s. The links between these themes appear in differing ways in each film. *Last House on the Left* (1972) pits alternative and traditional families, especially fathers, against one another, showing how both forms of family are threatened with destruction due to the social unrest of the time.

In its varieties of female representation the film represents a complex intermingling of gender politics that successfully reflects the confusion of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) delves more deeply into the relationship between men and women, in particular the cultural anxiety and fear that resulted from the rise of the independent woman. As this thesis has argued, Jennifer is both a product of second wave feminism and very much a hero of the anti-rape movement, representing the importance of women utilizing any tool at their disposal (including their sexual power) to stop rape.

Jacinda Read argues that the post-1970 rape-revenge narrative reflects a turn to “feminine, and even feminist, stories.”²⁹³ This thesis has attempted to draw out and examine this claim, reviewing the complex and often chaotic nature of feminist politics in the 70s and the complex texts that emerged from these times. Both *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) represent and speak to complex societal concerns about the impact of feminism and newly destabilized gender roles, at the same time as they generally reinforce traditionally masculine, heteronormative interests. Arguably, the most ‘feminist’ character in *Last House on the Left* (1972) is the psychopath Sadie, and yet it is her deranged view of gender equality that contributes to the kidnapping of Mari and Phyllis in the first place. Estelle and Mari represent two different versions of femininity: Estelle is the 1950s throwback with no small amount of disdain for the effects of feminism (bra burning, liberal attitudes to sex and sexuality in general), and Mari epitomizes the youth and vigor of a growing second-wave feminist, living within a broader countercultural movement. In the end, no character is unscathed by the confrontation between the rabid, out of control counterculture, represented by

²⁹³ Jacinda Read, *The new avengers: Feminism, femininity and the rape-revenge cycle* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 242.

Sadie and the gang, and the traditional patriarchal nuclear family. The film seems to be replying to the instability and uncertainty of the time, by dramatizing the extremes taken by the establishment and the counterculture movement of the time.

In contrast, *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) centers its rape-revenge narrative in the story of the rape survivor. Jennifer is the only female character in the film, and is thus burdened by the heavy weight of 1978's feminist politics. By this time, the second-wave feminist movement was slowing, the Vietnam War had ended, and Ronald Reagan was about to become the president. The repercussions of the turbulent 1960s and the Vietnam War were beginning to fade, and feminism was slowly becoming institutionalized. Jennifer's revenge is a powerful display of female strength, but it still hinges, to a large degree, on her ability to wield her sexuality as a weapon. The film also focuses on her attempt to heal; the story is one of female perseverance in the face of a violent patriarchy. In the end, Jennifer kills all of her rapists, figuratively slaying all patriarchy, and rides away finally free of her tormentors.

Last House on the Left (1972) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) are complicated film texts because of how they articulate rape and revenge together in ways that are neither wholly misogynistic nor fully feminist. In this way they can be seen to both reflect and contribute to the complex gender politics of their time, reflecting changes in gender, sexuality, family, and the nation as a whole. These post-1970s rape-revenge texts are not one-dimensional mainstream moneymakers as the recent remakes appear to be; instead, they are complicated narratives representing and commenting on the changing and often confusing socio-historical context of 1970s America.

While the original films articulate complex negotiations with the politics of their day, especially around issues of feminism and the rise of the liberated woman, the remakes signal a regressive politics in which masculinist perspectives and male dominance is restored to the centre of the narrative. In *Last House on the Left* (2009), women are to be saved rather than save themselves, in service of bolstering masculinity. In *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010), masculinity is in ruins, but the narrative retains the rapist's perspective. Both these films reflect the militaristic preoccupations of the post-9/11 era where the defense of the home front and the traditional family unit are of paramount concern. This concern is especially apparent in *Last House on the Left* (2009), in which John employs the rhetoric of 'readiness' and a 'willingness to do anything' to protect his family, echoing Bush era discourses justifying the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The alternative family unit demonstrated by Krug's family in the film, represents a form of domestic terrorism, the only answer to which is violent revenge. Masculinist interests and preoccupations are even more apparent in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010). In this film, the audience's perspective is almost always aligned with the rapists, and Jennifer, the rape survivor, is relegated to a powerless wraith-like figure who eventually becomes a robotic killing machine enacting spectacular killings for the (presumably male) audiences sadistic pleasure. Unlike the original film's complex political positions, *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) rings a discordant post-feminist note, suggesting that gender equality and rape are passé, second-wave feminist trifles which are no longer a problem.

Both remade films are depressingly simplistic as they have erased most of the subversive content of the originals that made the stories so compellingly complex. Both

remakes are conservative films, representing and supporting traditional, patriarchal ideals in which women are secondary objects. *Last House on the Left* loses its only arguably feminist character, reducing Sadie to a whimpering, pathetic mess — a woman who quite literally lives to serve her deranged lover. Similarly, Mari's mother is beholden to her husband, and acts essentially through him; told what to do at nearly every step, she very rarely makes an independent decision. *Last House on the Left* (2009) is the story of the strength of the lead male in times of crisis, representing the stereotypically masculine identity of the good patriarch as certain, consistent, violent and victorious. In contrast, *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) is a narrative completely devoted to exploring and legitimating male anxiety about women. Jennifer's rape is motivated because of Johnny's anxiety over his sexual performance, and thus his manhood, while Jennifer's revenge, seen largely through the eyes of her victims, is the story of an alpha female gone wild — the very epitome of a “femi-nazi” who is out of control. *Last House on the Left* (2009) portrays the victorious male and the victorious, and reconstituted, family, whereas *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) represents masculinity in ruins at the hands of an empowered and armed woman.

If the hallmark of the post-1970s rape-revenge film is its use of the female body as a scapegoat for the social unrest during and immediately after the Vietnam War, the same could be said of the post-9-11 rape-revenge remake in the wake of the Iraq War. Indeed, the contexts of each time period can also be seen as similar; both are ravaged by war, by various crises in masculine, heteronormative and Western power, and with gender/sexuality in flux. That is precisely why this analysis of both the original and remake, and the changes from one to the next, is so interesting, and indeed important.

Horror films represent *and* reproduce attitudes toward and about feminism, and feminist issues like sexual violence and gender inequality. Rape-revenge continues to be a compelling subgenre, offering representations of contemporary feminist politics, attitudes towards feminism itself, and its surrounding socio-political contexts. In *The American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, Steffen Hantke asserts that the current state of American horror represents a crisis within the genre because remakes, and mainstream horror in general, does not stand up to the 1970s films that feature “transgressiveness coupled with the mystique of rebellion and political subversiveness.”²⁹⁴ The 1970s rape-revenge film includes arguably feminist (though at once complex and contradictory) and transgressive narratives drawing on the spirit of countercultural revolt and exploring areas of societal and cultural dissent. In contrast, the post-9/11 rape-revenge remake reiterates narratives that are regressive and conservative. While the original films are a potential site of exploitive, mindless pleasure for viewers, they also offer a potential site of resistance to the heteronormative, patriarchal status quo, something that, as a feminist, I remain drawn to. Sadly, there is no such respite for the feminist viewer of the post-9/11 remakes which reassert a future devoid of any kind of progressive gender politics.

²⁹⁴ Steffen Hantke, ed., *The American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millenium* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), xviii.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name:	Kayley Viteo
Post-secondary Education and Degrees:	University of Texas at Austin Austin, Texas, USA 2007-2009 B.A. The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2010-2012 M.A.
Related Work Experience	Teaching Assistant The University of Western Ontario 2010-2012 Research Assistant The University of Western Ontario 2011-2012